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# Change: An Analysis of Vote Choice in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Change:  
An Analysis of Vote Choice in the 2008 Presidential Election

By

Maryssa Mataras

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for  
Honors in the Department of Political Science

UNION COLLEGE  
June, 2011

## ABSTRACT:

This thesis investigates the factors that helped Americans come to a vote choice in the 2008 presidential election. After an in-depth analysis and presentation on the existing literature, I then present key moments in both McCain and Obama's campaigns looking at the context, campaigns, and candidates. I then break down the turnout and vote choice of each major social group and demographic in the United States, juxtaposing it with the group's historical voting trends and turnout. In 2008 there was a large nationwide Democratic shift. Chapter four seeks to defend whether it was the context of the election or the campaigns of the candidates that mattered most in the vote decision process. After arriving presenting the evidence, I concluded that it was impossible to isolate the effects of the contexts and the campaigns. Nevertheless, this paper investigates all that matters during a presidential election.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: A REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE VOTE CHOICE.....	3
Predispositions	
From Reinforcement to Limited Effects Theory	
Effects of Mass Communication	
Role of Campaigns	
Factors that Cause Conversion	
Conclusions	
CHAPTER TWO: THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION.....	31
The Candidates	
The Campaigns	
Context of the Election	
Conclusions	
CHAPTER THREE: VOTING RATES AND VOTE CHOICE OF SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES.....	49
Demographic Make-Up of the United States and Turnout in 2008	
Voting Patterns of Demographics	
Conclusions	
Tables 3.1-3.14	
CHAPTER FOUR: CONTEXT OR CAMPAIGN?.....	80
Change	
Reasons for Change: Campaigns	
Conclusions	
Table 4.1	
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS.....	109
Disproving the Limited Effects Theory	
Campaign Effects Cannot Be Isolated	
Race Prevented a Landslide Victory for Obama	
Money Matters	
Context and Campaigning Matters	

CHAPTER ONE:  
A REVIEW OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MASS COMMUNICATION  
AND FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE VOTE CHOICE

Political campaigns are informative, exciting and expensive; however, their effectiveness is more contested than most elections. In addition to being highly contested, the 2008 presidential election between Senators Barack Obama and John McCain was historical and revolutionary. The United States elected its first African American president, after the longest and most expensive campaign period in U.S. history (Denton 2009; Sabato 2010; Todd and Gawiser 2009). “With the largest gap between primaries and national conventions,” the Obama and McCain campaigns spent a respective \$553 and \$380 million, totaling more than \$1.6 billion (Denton 2009, xi).<sup>1</sup> Voter turnout was equally as remarkable, with more than 131 million Americans casting ballots in 2008, encompassing 63% of all eligible voters (Denton 2009; Sabato 2010; Todd and Gawiser 2009).

The Republican candidate, John McCain, and Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, both led strategic and informative campaigns, however Obama emerged as the victor on November 4, 2008. It is difficult to measure which facets of his campaign led him to success or whether the effectiveness of his campaign had no bearing on his victory. Today there is a heated debate in the world of political communication that focuses on campaigning. Some communication experts believe that Americans follow campaigns on a plethora of mediums and use the information provided by the campaign itself and news sources (which are often influenced by campaigns) to fairly evaluate each candidate and eventually make an informed decision on Election Day. This school of thought places emphasis on the tactics and strategies of a campaign, concluding well-

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Harper, “Voters Weary of Media Barrage Just Want to Vote,” *The Washington Times*, 31 October 2008, pg. A03.

run campaigns are able to [garner more votes](#) and thus, the candidate with the best campaign will win. The other school of thought supports the limited effects theory that believes elections can be predicted before official campaigning begins because of predispositions that all voters have about a particular party or candidates. These predispositions or preconceived ideas can originate from many factors: socioeconomic status, political identity, race, religion, residence, and evaluations of the current controlling party or president.

With two contrary theories, one that places emphasis on personal attitudes and characteristics and another that values the importance of communication in a political campaign, it has led me to a quandary as to which theory is more viable in explaining the victory of Barack Obama in 2008. My research will investigate the Obama campaign, the effects of the political and economic context of the U.S., the attitudinal and social makeup of the United States and its implications for elections, and the effectiveness of the Obama campaign in garnering votes.

The rest of this chapter will further define the two schools of thought [from the fields](#) of voting behavior and election studies. First, by defining predispositions, I will be able to present the questionable strength of predispositions, which is the basis of the limited effects theory. I will then present the effects of mass communication, which includes and also defines the role of political campaigns. Using the term coined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Gaudet I then indicate the factors that cause conversion,<sup>2</sup> one of which being effective campaigning. The following chapter will provide an in-depth description of the candidates, their campaigns, and the context of the 2008 presidential election. The rest of this thesis compares historical voting tendencies and rates of specific demographics with the ones experienced in 2008. Because there was a large Democratic shift across almost each demographic analyzed, I then seek to establish

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<sup>2</sup> Conversion is the change in vote intention throughout the course of a campaign season.

the reasons behind this shift. The information in this chapter will provide the background and context for the research presented in the following chapters.

### Predispositions

The limited effects theory is based on the notion that predispositions make individuals more likely to favor a particular candidate. *The People's Choice and Voting* are dedicated to proving that campaigns have minimal effects on the public and that vote choice is determined according to predispositions of voters even before campaigning begins. Predispositions can vary from party identification, socioeconomic status, religion, race, gender, and residence. Scholars have argued that this is the reason presidential elections have become predictable (Campbell 2008). There is a schism, however, within the realm of supporters of the limited effects theory as to which indicators or predispositions are more effective in forecasting vote choice, due to the fact that each scholar tested the effectiveness of different variables in different categories of these indicators.

### *Party Identification*

In the past fifty years, despite the increase of polarization, there has been a significant decrease in partisanship in the United States, with an increase of citizens identifying themselves as Independents (Holbrook 1996; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Miller and Shanks 1996). One's party identity means they are registered to a specific political party or are in accord with their party's particular goals and policies. If one is registered to a party he is at liberty to vote in primaries within that specific party. Members of office belong to their political parties and often work

together in government. Parties also form and sponsor organizations like committees and special interest groups that promote their initiatives.

As Lasswell (1927) hinted, neutrals are more likely to be persuaded because of their lack of general political knowledge and strong ideology. With the increase of those not affiliating with a political party, this could mean that more Americans are likely to be persuaded than before (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Holbrook 1996; Kraus and Davis 1976). These Independents are somewhat neutral; they are more likely to alternate their vote choice between the two main parties and have weak predispositions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) however, found that those with less political knowledge have a strong sense of affiliation to a party their lack of general knowledge causes them to default into one party, often voting solely according to party. Similarly, Campbell et al. (1960) and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) believe that party identification and the psychological attachment a voter has to her party enhances her perception, exposure, and evaluation of the candidate of her party. This is true even if it is not consistent (although it usually is) with her ideologies. And this is especially true for issues that seem distant or foreign to voters.

Although partisanship cannot account “for all aspects of the image formed by the public, party identification *did* color attitudes toward foreign issues in some measure as it colored individual feeling on every one of the [\[examined\]](#) dimensions of attitude” (Campbell et al. 1960, [132](#), 131). Additionally, Campbell et al. (1960) found that party affiliation was correlated to political activity and participation, after evidence showed Independents were less involved, as did Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) in the 2000 and 2004 elections. In the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections *The American Voter Revisited* examined six attitudes towards political objects that



affect vote decision aside from demographic characteristics. The six were: “Republican presidential nominee, Democratic presidential nominee, foreign policy issues, demographic policy issues, social group interests, and the performance of the parties as managers of the government” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 62), which are the same (contextually) as those explored by Campbell et al. (1960) during the 1952 and 1956 elections in *The American Voter*. Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) concluded that these six attitudinal factors were extremely accurate with a .789 correlation<sup>3</sup> in the 2004 election, and when adding party identification into these six factors it “produces real improvement in the statistical estimation... however, the predictive accuracy does not change” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 124).

*The New American Voter* by Miller and Shanks (1996) tested the validity of Campbell et al.’s (1960) study and further elaborated on both the long and short-term effects of party identification in our modern political era. Miller and Shanks (1996, 512) concluded that despite the decline of those identifying with a specific party they “are very much in accord with the formulations of *The American Voter* which saw partisan loyalties limited the frequency and magnitude of shifts in electoral preferences... [but also recognized that] party identification is only one of a host of themes relevant to vote choice, but year after year it is the dominant predisposition in providing continuity in voters’ perspectives and behaviors from one election to the next.” Campbell et al. (1960), Key (1966), and Lewis-Beck et al. (2008) also found party identification to be the most important and fundamental factor that propels vote choice, but all acknowledge that other predispositions, like religion and race that can alter vote choice as well.

Finkel (1993, 11) concluded his research by explaining that his calculations show that 81% of the votes in 1980 could be predicted correctly based solely on race and the June values of party identification and presidential

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<sup>3</sup> This correlation can be interpreted as an estimation of the electoral vote, which used the six attitudes towards political objects; it was 78.9% correct.

approval, i.e., without taking into account any attitude changes during the campaign whatsoever...This 81% predictive accuracy is roughly 10-15 percentage points higher than the 'predisposition' vote models reported in the early Lazarsfeld-Berelson studies, and shows that campaign period 'activation' is at least as prevalent in contemporary elections as it was in the 1940s.

Although Finkel used race as a variable in his calculations, this conclusion validates the limited effects theory, taking into account vote intentions in June, prior to campaigning.

#### *Socioeconomic Status and all that is Associated*

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944, 25) were the first to explore this notion of the predetermined vote and concluded "that the greatest part of the predictive value of all these factors derives from three factors: SES [socioeconomic status] level, religion, and residence." Although they did not measure predictability of these traits, part of their study focused on the effects of intensity of predispositions and their effects on vote choice. "The vote decisions of 70% of the people whether or not they expressed an early vote intentions, corresponded to the vote tendencies prevailing among groups with social characteristics similar to their own" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet 1944, 95). Individuals that experienced cross-pressures (which are conflicting characteristics that affect vote preference) are more likely to have weaker predispositions making them extremely more viable to: a.) be less interested in the election, b.) take more time to make a vote decision, and c.) become a 'converter' which indicates a change in one's vote intention throughout the course of campaigning and consisted of just 8% of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) study.

Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) focused on the social aspects of voting by conducting a series of four interviews with one thousand residents of Elmira, New York during the 1948 presidential election. They discovered that families tend to vote similarly, and even

“vote change is correlated with political preferences of family members” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 148). The researchers then hypothesized that this is a result from religion and class, since a family unit usually shares these two predispositions. This study makes it difficult to distinguish social behaviors and their relevance to vote choice. Being that a family usually shares the same religion, residence, social class (and occupation because at during this study most homes had just one income), and ethnicity, and together discusses politics it is hard to isolate which characteristic comes first and which one influences the other.<sup>4</sup> Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) found that residence, even among non-natives of a specific region, are more likely to alter their opinions to ones that are more similar to their neighbors and co-workers. This explains why a majority of states are dedicated to one party, and why there are so few swing states. It is, however, safe to conclude, as Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954) established, that family, along with all of related values, perpetuates political attitudes.

Holbrook (1996) found in a study that socio-demographic characteristics are less efficient factors in vote prediction. He found that accuracy was only 83.6% and 89.8% in 1976 and 1984 respectively when considering party identification, conservative or liberal ideology, race, union membership, whether one lived in a city or in the south, and approval of then-president and/or his respective party. Holbrook (1996) concluded his study that socio-demographic variables were less consistent with vote prediction, whereas Finkel (1993) used a mixture of demographics and attitudes, and *The American Voter*, *The New American Voter*, and *The American Voter Revisited* focused solely on party identification and attitudes.

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<sup>4</sup> Although religion has been deemed a primary indicator of political preference, it must be noted that today religiosity is a better indicator of predisposition as opposed to *which* religion one believe in. “Catholics were strongly Democratic through the 1970s, and have split more evenly between the parties since. Jews remain predominantly Democrat” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 137).

### *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Age*

Characteristic traits, like gender, race, ethnicity, and age are what most scholars in this chapter have deemed secondary in predictability. Recent research has shifted from away from measuring the impact that traits have on predispositions, and is now more focused on the impact that these traits have on predicting predispositions, ideology, and preferences. When measured alone each characteristic does have its own predisposition toward a particular party or ideology. However, it is difficult to weigh the importance of these predispositions because many individuals experience internal cross-pressures.

Individuals that share the same qualities, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or age, tend to share similar voting behavior and preferences. “Group partisanship is highly stable” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 136-7). **Often** these preferences are intrinsic to other qualities that this group of individuals all experience. For instance, “Americans of Hispanic origin have been largely Democratic... [which] comes from their disadvantaged socioeconomic status” (Lewis-Beck 2008, 324). Similarly, the voting patterns of African Americans “are the most distinctive...[and] overwhelmingly vote Democratic in presidential elections” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 322). Voter turnout among blacks is significantly below the national average. This is worth mentioning because in 2008 the first African American was a viable candidate for president and it aroused interest and participation in the election among African Americans.

At first the gender “gap initially favored the Republicans” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 326). However, in the past fifty years, women seem to maintain “pro-Democratic preferences” (Miller and Shanks 1996, 143) which most experts believe is a result from women’s liberal stances on social issues. Researchers have discovered that attachment to a political party intensifies with age (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Although Americans tend to

get more conservative as they age, it is not true that they tend to favor the Republican Party.

“The percentage of Republicans from the youngest to the oldest forms a flat line” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 148). It is true that many Americans join political parties after their twenties, which could perhaps make them more likely to join the more conservative party. As a result of shared experiences and preferences, almost every social group in the United States has strong and stable partisanship. The strength of this attachment is a fundamental in predicting vote choice; it will be measured and researched in the rest of this paper.

#### *From Reinforcement to the Limited Effects Theory*

The authors of *The People's Choice*, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, were the first to conclude that campaigns merely reinforce preexisting preferences, which are determined mostly, by predispositions. Klapper (1960), Campbell et al. (1960), Key (1966), Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Finkel (1993), and Miller and Shanks (1996) found similar conclusions but all theorized different grounds for this result. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) developed a series of processes the individual undergoes during an election: activation, reinforcement, and possibly (although uncommon) conversion. This manner of evaluating campaigns proves that “the tendency of persuasive mass communication to reinforce existing opinion is anything but hypodermic” (Klapper 1960, 18). Klapper (1960), as Benoit (2007, 4) explains, attributed these “limited effects in large part to selective exposure (people tend to expose themselves to messages which agree with their attitudes), selective perception (people tend to interpret stimuli including messages, based on existing attitudes), and selective retention (information that agrees with one's attitudes is likely to be remembered longer than discrepant information).” Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) define activation as the re-arousal of political interest, the increase to

campaign exposure, and the rediscovery of political preferences. These preferences are embedded in predispositions that the three researchers determined were compelled by socioeconomic status, religion, and region of residence. Whereas Finkel (1993, 17) found that, when evaluating voters' "race and precampaign party identification and evaluations of incumbent performance, accounted for [and helped determine] over 80% of all votes in the 1980 election."

Reinforcement is the idea that previous attitudes about a specific candidate or political party that are formed in the beginning of a campaign are merely reaffirmed by the end. "Reinforcement is or may be abetted by (1) predispositions and the related processes of selective exposure, selection perception, and selective attention; (2) the groups, and the norms of groups, to which the audience members belong; (3) interpersonal dissemination of the content of communications; (4) the exercise of opinion leadership; and (5) the nature of mass media in a free enterprise society" (Klapper 1960, 19). Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) proved this by staging a series of 600 interviews from respondents that represented Erie County, Ohio, from May (before any campaigns and conventions began) to November in 1940. Given that only 8% of voters in this region changed their vote intention from May to November, the reinforcement theory held true for a large ninety two percent of the interviewees.

Campbell et al. (1960) and Key (1966) concluded that party identification is the main factor influencing vote choice and that campaigns minimally change party preferences. Similar to Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Campbell et al. (1960, 147) saw that in election surveys conducted from 1948, 1952, and 1956, political preferences were developed "before the individual attains voting age and that this orientation strongly reflects his immediate social milieu." This social climate along with predispositions depicts one's party identification of

choice and forms a lasting loyalty that seems to get stronger as one ages. “Of those who can remember their first vote for president two thirds still identify with the same party they first voted for” (Campbell et al.1960, 148). Complementary to this, Key (1966, 18) concluded that “probably more than 45 million of the 68 million [<66%] or so persons who voted in 1960 cast their ballot for the presidential candidate of the same party they had supported in 1956.

Essentially, for one reason or another, many political scientists believe that campaigns and elections merely reinforce preexisting opinions about specific political parties or candidates that are often determined by preexisting dispositions or attitudes. The limited effects theory, which is credited to Lazarsfeld after his research described in *The People’s Choice, Personal Influence*, and *Voting*, developed [from](#) *The People’s Choice* reinforcement [finding](#). Although the two are strikingly similar, reinforcement alludes to the resurfacing opinions, whereas the limited effects theory focuses on personal characteristics, placing all credence of vote choice on these predispositions. At the core of these two theories is the idea that political campaigns have little effectiveness in changing the opinion or vote intention of the electorate.

### Effects of Mass Communication

Although proponents of the reinforcement and limited effects theories believe that campaigning is ineffective, there is ample evidence that proves the effectiveness of mass communication and campaigns. All campaigns, whether they promote a product, idea, or candidate, use methods of mass communication to connect and inform the public. Their goal of this communication is to connect with and persuade the public convincingly enough to take action (whether it be for whom one votes or what one purchases). Communication from political campaigns now employs a wide array of avenues to inform the electorate – from phone calls,

brochures, and canvassing, to televised speeches, debates, and advertisements. This paper will focus on the direct communication campaigns make with voters; nevertheless, it is important to note that the media is another critical venue the public utilizes to obtain campaign information and expert opinion. Often times the media distorts and alters campaign information, therefore it is essential that the two sources (the media and the campaign team), which both provide a wealth of information to voters, are [separately distinguished](#).

Theories behind which communication method works most effectively have evolved over time. Because direct communication with candidates was so limited prior to recent technological advancements, like the computer and the Internet, the early research about communication effects focused on the media. As America was rapidly industrializing in the early twentieth century with advancements in technology and machinery, like the radio and the television, Harold Lasswell (1927) pioneered an investigation on the effects of the media and propaganda during World War I in the 1920s. Even with primitive research techniques, Lasswell (1927) was able to recognize and deduce that the media, in particular the use of propaganda during wartime, can and *does* alter opinions; and eventually these opinions alter the actions of the public.

Lasswell's discovery of the influence of mass communication on a populace was reaffirmed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Klapper (1960), Kraus and Davis (1976), Finkel (1993), Holbrook (1996), and Benoit (2007). However, they disagree on the *way* in which mass communication affects the individual and the *degree* of effectiveness.<sup>5</sup> Lasswell's (1927) theory of direct effectuation of the media on the masses is now commonly referred to as the Hypodermic Needle Theory. This discourse credits mass communication (including campaigns)

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<sup>5</sup> In this sense, 'effectiveness' means the ability for a campaign, of any nature, to maintain or change the opinion of an individual in favor of a candidate or opinion.



with the ability to inject and instill persons with the ideas and information campaigns create and publicize.

The Hypodermic Needle Theory also suggests that mass communication can place ideas in the minds of individuals without any objection or investigation (Clawson and Oxley 2008). Because voters, consumers, and individuals are not merely inserted with ideas and instantaneously accept them as valid, Lasswell's original theory, that mass communication affects the public is accepted, however it was quickly criticized because it lends far too much credence in the direct reception and acceptance of the information. "It failed to account for the way in which individuals were found to expose themselves to media information, or to perceive and retain information following exposure" (Kraus and Davis 1976, 115). Years later, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) conducted their own research accepting Lasswell's (1927) overarching theory that there are, indeed, effects of the media and mass communication on the public. However the two teams deemed Lasswell's (1927) hypodermic and direct approach too straightforward and simplistic and elaborated on the intervening variables that alter communication reception.

#### *Effects of Mass Communication: Intervening Variables*

Since the Hypodermic Needle Theory of communication reception was discredited for its extremely direct nature, political scientists have investigated what factors alter the reception of mass communication. There are many variables that can alter how information is internalized; these variables can vary from personal characteristics to social settings. This dichotomy is very important to distinguish. Scholars that believe personal traits and predispositions have more credibility in affecting opinion would most likely favor the limited effects theory. This ascertains

[that because of previous political preferences, driven by predispositions, voters are minimally affected by campaigns. Contrarily, other](#) experts that value the importance of communication methods believe information [that](#) is received and retained is a result of exposure, medium, content, social conversations and other factors that are extraneous to an individual's traits. It is extremely complicated to completely separate these two [schools of thought](#). However, for the purpose of this section of Chapter 1, [which describes the](#) existing literature on the effectiveness of mass communication, I will focus solely on the variables that intervene with mass communication reception; [these variables](#) exist outside of preconceived personal opinions and predispositions.

Katz and Lazarsfeld's *Personal Influence* used a series of questionnaires conducted in June and August of 1945 to measure the influences of mass communication on the public. The team's research found evidence that supports both schools of thought surrounding the effects of mass communication by finding "four such intervening variables: exposure, medium, content, and predisposition" (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, 20). The last variable lends itself more useful in proving the limited effects theory, which was discussed earlier in this chapter. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) discovery of the importance of exposure, medium, and content most certainly supports the theory that mass communication is able to influence individuals.

Exposure to political or campaign information alters the efficiency of the material's ability to affect a voter. Exposure alone affects not only information retention but also a plentitude of political attitudes: political intensity, activity, and mobilization (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Klapper 1960; Kraus and David 1976). With the diverse nature of mass communication, exposure to campaign [material](#) has become more [abundant](#) and [accessible](#). Franz and Ridout (2007, [485](#)) reaffirmed the findings related to exposure and influence in

*Personal Influence* finding “ample evidence that exposure to advertising can move vote choice and influence attitudes towards candidates” and that those with less political knowledge were more likely to be influenced by advertisements.

The increase of exposure to political campaigns and information is a direct result from the increasing multitude of mediums, which have spurred from technological advancements. The medium can alter the effectiveness of the material (Benoit 2007; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). These advancements have revolutionized candidates’ ability to communicate with the electorate, allowing them to reach drastically wider audience, and more effectively target individuals. Mediums now range from direct mailings and brochures, radio, newspapers, television (including campaign advertisements, appearances on talk shows and debates, and coverage on the news) to the Internet (which also facilitates advertisements, campaign donations, social networking sites, candidate web pages, and also provides an unlimited forum for political discussions).

Campaigns have recently become increasingly negative. Negative attack advertisements, directed at opposing candidates or specific issues, alter attitudes towards both the candidates receiving the criticism and giving it (Kahn and Kenney 1999). Researchers have inconclusively found that voter turnout can decrease (Kahn and Kenney 1999) and increase (Martin 2004) as a result. Although the response to negative attacks “are not universal” (Martin 2004, 557), they rely on tone, context and medium, but primarily “depend on political predispositions” (Kahn and Kenney 1999, 887) and preexisting political preferences. Aside from the direct variables, of exposure, medium, and content that Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) first addressed, these researchers, along with Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), discovered a new variable that alters the effectiveness of mass communication. This new variable focuses on the role of ‘interpersonal relationships,’ and social contact and discussion, which led them to a new

understanding of the reception of information and mass communication, called the Two-Step Flow of Communication Theory.

According to the Two-Step Flow Theory “ideas seem to flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to less active sections of the population” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, 32; also see Klapper 1960; Kraus and Davis 1976; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Opinion leaders, as Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944), Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), Klapper (1960), Kraus and Davis (1976) and Livingstone (2006) explain, are the intermediaries between the information emitted through mass communication and how the public makes opinions. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) further developed the term after it was first coined by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet in *The People’s Choice*.

These opinion leaders are as seen as leaders in their respective communities. They are subjected to more media exposure as a result of their given political interest, transmit their gained knowledge to others and “exert a disproportionately great influence on the vote intentions of their fellows” (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955, 32). Unknowingly or strategically, these opinion leaders exude confidence and competence in the subject matter of interest. Because opinion leaders are usually trusted friends, family members, or colleagues, their beliefs and preferences are able hold more value to the rest of their community.

Although Kraus and Davis (1976) differentiate the Two-Step Flow Theory [and](#) the Social Influence Model, the two are virtually synonymous, both indicating the important role of social relationships in the retention of information through mass communication and furthermore, opinion-making. Politically, “potential for change or for instability is evident... Those who discuss politics with the opposition are more likely than others subsequently to take on that

opposite preference in their own voting” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 119), indicating the influence of social-political conversations and their potentiality to change opinion.

With the changes in the media as Bennett (2007) discusses, becoming more dramatic and personalized, the increasing popularity of TV talk shows with extremely opinioned hosts, some researchers, like Holbrook (1996) and Bennett and Manheim (2006), believe that the media has become an opinion leader itself, combining the process of gathering political information and opinions from leaders. Yet, despite the changes of the media, the social milieu of voters, along with exposure, medium, and content of mass communication sets a [valuable](#) context for opinion-making.

#### *Effects of Mass Communication: Problems with Intervening Variables*

The same researchers that found variables that alter the ways in which information is retrieved through mass communication have also noted some problems weighing [the influence of these variables](#) due to predispositions and preexisting opinions and ideas. It must first be noted that individuals are not all equally influenceable. Some are more influential; those individuals can be labeled opinion leaders. Individuals with less political knowledge are more likely to be influenced by advertisements and campaign material (Franz and Ridout 2007). This disparity of influence in a community or social setting found by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) is a fundamental discovery that helps measure the reception of mass communication, including campaign material. Even Lasswell (1927) recognized, but never expanded on, the varying characteristics of an individual that affect one’s ability to be influenced [by propaganda or campaign information](#). He claims “success depends upon traditional prejudices” (Lasswell 1927, 127). This idea of

prejudices and inconsistencies with the ability one can be influenced was further explored by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), deeming these preexisting preferences as predispositions.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) both found that increased exposure led to an increase in political intensity and activity. “The more that people read about and listen to the campaign on the mass media, the more interested they become about the election and the more strongly they come to feel about their candidate” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 246). However, there are a few problems with this statement: (a) as Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) found, increased exposure increased intensity towards a candidate that an individual has already, *previously*, decided to support; and (b) this claim would lead one to assume that the current omnipresence of mass communication from campaigns on the news or on our computer screens would still increase political intensity, activity, and mobilization. However, Bennett (2009) has found that with the increasing space for political information, in addition to the dramatized, personalized, homogenized, nature of today’s media, it is more likely for a voter to feel over exposed to the media’s coverage of campaigning, and this over exposure *reversely* affects the electorate’s affinity towards politics.

Klapper (1960) also does not completely agree with Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Campbell et al. (1960), and Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet’s (1944) conclusion that voters’ feeling about their candidates intensify as their exposure increases. He claims, “consciously or unconsciously, they [voters] avoid communications of the opposite hue” (Klapper 1960, 19), suggesting selective exposure. This notion means the information a voter receives is not uniform, but instead favors his political preferences that previously existed. Similarly, Iyengar and Simon (2000) criticize Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee’s (1954) research deeming their evidence on exposure invalid.

The pair claims the half-century old research inadequate due to their survey and/or questionnaire methods because individuals are more likely to overestimate their exposure and unconsciously only subject themselves to news and candidates that have similar ideologies, skewing their evidence and conclusions.

“For leadership in political discussion people mainly turn to others like themselves” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954, 109). This would decrease the possibility for individuals to “discuss politics with the opposition [and]... take on that opposite preference” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 119). It would then be more likely that opinion leaders and social-political conversations simply reinforce existing feeling towards a specific party or candidate (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). As with vote choice, these problems with the variables that affect the reception of mass communication derive from preexisting opinions.

### *Role of Political Campaigns*

The primary goal of a campaign is always to garner more votes. Whether a campaign can effectively sway voters away from their original ideas about a political party or specific candidate is a viable question this paper seeks to answer. Campaigns employ a host of strategies that help them attract more voters; and along the way they influence voters, the media, and political parties. Initially, parties or campaigns seek out capital to fund further promotion of a particular candidate. In the 2008 presidential election, the Republican Party candidate, John McCain raised more than \$360 million while accepting the public financing option. The Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, collected a record breaking \$639 million from donors. These resources provide for expensive television advertisements, an extensive campaign of

hundreds, travel, and much more. This money also facilitated contact between the electorate and the candidate allowing [the candidate's](#) message and platform to be heard by a wider audience. 'Direct' contact that occurs at party conventions, speeches, debates, televised advertisements, and [acceptance addresses](#) sends messages straight to voters.<sup>6</sup> Although this 'direct' contact has become more frequent than it has been in years past, it is still rare and limited. This confirms what Holbrook (1996), Benoit (2007), Klapper (1960), and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) concluded: that there is (usually) a second step in the flow of communication. Klapper (1960) and Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) saw political discussions as the main intervening step in the flow of communication; whereas Holbrook (1996) identifies the media's coverage of campaign and election news as this intermediary, and Benoit (2007) recognizes the importance of both the media and social-political conversations.

Campaigns work diligently to raise awareness [of](#) and attention [to](#) their candidate. With candidates in the spotlight, they become subjected to evaluation by the media and the electorate. Campaigns try to alter preconceived perceptions of their candidate and respective parties (Benoit 2007) by publicizing policy stances, past achievements, and competency. Some issue stances can polarize the electorate, however by raising issues that are of importance to the nation and by providing effective solutions, campaigns can "influence the relative importance of issues" (Benoit 2007, 29). For example, if the campaign of candidate X publicizes and stresses his solution to global warming, it exemplifies 'agenda-setting,' the idea of individuals deciding what issues are of more importance (as opposed to issues that are of utmost importance receiving precedence). As a result, the media will most likely report candidate X's interest in global warming and the electorate will then perceive this issue as of higher importance. With the

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<sup>6</sup> Meaning there may be a medium, like the television or a brochure providing information from the candidate directly, but no third party or media outlet intervening in this communication.



platforms of candidates being promoted and analyzed, campaigns try to tell the voter what issues are most important, altering the way in which they evaluate candidates.

Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) discovered three roles of campaigns: activation, reinforcement, and conversion. Activation, they concluded was the re-establishment of one's political identity in a party and/or of political ideologies, which is a result from propaganda arousing interest, increased interest bringing increased exposure, selective attention, and votes crystallizing. Because individuals "avoid communications of the opposite hue" (Klapper 1960, 19) and "mainly turn to others like themselves" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee 1954, 109), reinforcement most likely occurs in social discussions, which reaffirms preexisting opinions and attitudes. Voters that had changed their vote intention from May to November in *The People's Choice* were identified as converters. It was proven to be extremely rare, occurring in only 8% of all voters studied in Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1955) research; however, this small proportion of the electorate plays a crucial role in every election.

Aside from the three effects of campaigns that *The People's Choice* concluded (activation, reinforcement, and conversion), Holbrook (1996) stresses the fundamental goal of a campaign is to inform citizens. Without campaigns that garner media attention and present salient issues and solutions to our world, the electorate would be unable to make an informed decision on Election Day, nullifying the purpose of our democracy. It is undeniable that through the process of communicating to the electorate, campaigns affect the actions and impressions (if not necessarily vote choice) of voters.

### Factors That Cause Conversions

Researchers have found that, although small, there is a portion of the American electorate that changes their vote intention from the beginning of an election cycle to Election Day. Some experts have found that a change in opinion is the result of the context of the election. This theory credits conversions to political attitudes about the current government. Other political scientists have found that effective, well-run, strategic campaigns can convert individuals away from their original vote intention by informing the public about their candidate in a manner that appeals to the most citizens.

### *Political Attitudes*

In 1940, the authors of *The People's Choice* encountered voters switching away from their original vote intention. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) studied these converters and discovered that these individuals switched because they had weak predispositions and carefully struggled with their vote choice, were unhappy with the idea of President Roosevelt serving a third term, and were unhappy with the state of the economy and looking for change.

It is certain that the political and economic climate can cause vote conversions (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al 1960; Holbrook 1996; Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). Holbrook (1996) proposes a more simplistic model to predict vote choice that relies solely on the evaluation of the economy. "In good economic times voters are expected to be willing to return the party in power and in bad economic times voters are expected to be more willing to change the party in power" (Holbrook 1996, 25). When taking into account percentage of GNP growth (economy), party strength in Congress, party identification, and incumbency the average estimates of the vote choice of Americans "were

within 3.56 percentage points of the actual election result” (Holbrook 1996, 27). However, it must be noted that in four elections from 1900 to 1992 (in 1948, 1960, 1975, and 1992) this model wrongly predicts the winner. This is, what Holbrook calls, evidence of rational-choice voting which is an example of retrospective voting that Key (1966) established. Retrospective voting theorizes that voters contextualize elections and focus on their short-term attitudes of the incumbent presidential party to guide their vote choice (Holbrook 1996). However, it cannot be neglected to mention that these short-term evaluations are tainted by long-term attitudes, like party identification and political ideology. But these long-term attitudes usually do not lead to conversion.

### *Effective Campaigns*

There is ample evidence that indicates that voters, at times, cast their ballots for candidates that do not align with their predispositions. Increased exposure to campaign material from the Republican Party to a Democratically predisposed voter can make her more likely to convert, and vice versa, especially those with less political knowledge. There is “ample evidence that [proves] exposure to advertising can move vote choice and influence attitudes towards candidates” (Franz and Ridout 2007, 485). And “those who discuss politics with the opposition are more likely than others subsequently to take on that opposite preference in their own voting” (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 119). Thus, effective campaigns, according to Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) and Franz and Ridout (2007), can cause conversions.

Speeches made by candidates send informative strategic messages to voters.<sup>7</sup> Acceptance [addresses](#) at nominating and party conventions slightly increase public opinion with an “aggregate shift in the candidate support favoring the convention party’s candidate” (Holbrook 1996, 77). After the 1992 Democratic National Convention, [support](#) for the Democratic candidate, Bill Clinton, rose a significant 13.6%. The massive increase of media attention is the rationale scholars use to explain this ‘bump’ in public opinion, and also explains why the increase is less significant after the initial party convention (Campbell 2008; Holbrook 1996; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944). However, because each party has its own respective convention and each candidate gives her [acceptance address](#) this ‘bump’ is matched by the opposing party’s increase in support, and therefore seems to nullify one another forming an equilibrium (Holbrook 1996).

Debates offer a different, rare, and unique platform for candidates to inform viewers face-to-face next to their opponents, with what is usually the largest audience a candidate will experience while campaigning. The ‘winner’ of each debate shortly after experiences an increase in public opinion, nevertheless, just as it does with conventions, postdebate ‘bumps’ in public opinion shortly regress (Campbell 2008; Holbrook 1996; Miller and Shanks 1996). Because of the attention placed on debates, front-runners often avoid this platform because their expectations are set higher, making it more difficult for this candidate to be evaluated well (Campbell 2008). Since debates are later in campaigns their influence is less significant, being that voters have already formed opinions and been exposed to a host of campaign information. This timing factor also, however, narrows the scope and affects the weight of issues on voters (Campbell 2008; Holbrook 1996).

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<sup>7</sup> Rallies are different in this category because they are mostly attended by preexisting supporters.

Although viewed by millions of Americans, it seems as though the content and issues discussed during these debates is less important than the analysis and spin the media gives them. The media places an emphasis on debate performance, personal traits, and a supposed 'winner' (Bennett 2009; Holbrook 1996). As a result, memorable gaffes and errors during debates receive massive media attention and leave lasting impressions on voters. Consequently, "candidates are able to use debates as tools of persuasion, but much less successfully than they are able to use conventions for the same purpose" (Holbrook 1996, 123) because of the many implications prefacing the debates, like expectations and timing, and attention focused on performance over content.

Evaluations of the economy and political objects indubitably influence vote choice. Political identification alters a voter's opinion of issues and candidates, and perception of all campaign-related components, like debates, speeches, and vice presidential selection. As stated, experience, qualifications, abilities, and personality traits are the criteria used to evaluate candidates (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Competence, effectiveness, integrity, and empathy are how the electorate assesses personality traits (Miller and Shanks 1996). These factors all weigh heavily on the outcome of elections but are also altered by party identification because certain parties are predisposed to weighing specific issues differently. Effective campaigns 'play up' the qualifications of their candidate that make them more viable presidents in the given economic and political time. With the evidence that supports the substantial influence of short-term factors, like the state of the economy and evaluations of the current government, this proves to be a valuable method to attract voters with opposing demographics and predispositions (Benoit 2007).

With the proven strength of party identification, votes from existing supporters are necessary to win an election. Mobilizing the base is a method campaigns use that involves less

persuasion, but instead reiterates the importance of voting, and solidifies Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet's (1944) idea of reinforcement. However, this not to say that campaigns are idle and merely rely on reinforcement. Campaigns must be active in targeting and contacting key demographics that will be likely voters to ensure they turnout on Election Day. By strategically targeting an existing base or likely voters, a campaign can increase voter turnout in a way that is beneficial to its candidate. This also promotes democracy and political engagement. Candidates and campaigns are able to target these likely voters by maintaining quintessential party platforms and policies that easily appeal to those that have a strong sense of partisanship. Campbell et al. (1960) ascertained that elections are mere reflections of the electorate's attitudes towards a particular candidate, and they saw partisanship to be the main indicator that influenced attitudes and vote choice. Thus, it is a role of the campaigns to activate preexisting supporters, reinforce their ideals and opinions, and then mobilize them (Campbell 2008; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1944).

Lastly, although not inherently embedded in campaigns, the press has an extremely influential voice that shapes the opinions of the electorate. With the social and technological revolutions of the United States, Bennett (2009) saw the growing biases of the media: personalization, dramatization, fragmentation, and an authority-disorder. By focusing on personal traits of candidates that do not reflect policy, qualifications, and competency, the [media](#) has been able to shape the minds of voters into assuming that the character of candidates is a more valuable indicator of their ability. The media also has become fragmented and superfluous, overwhelming voters with campaign information that insignificantly reports the status of candidates and their rankings. And despite earlier findings that increased exposure increases political interest (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954), an over consumption of campaign

information can actually disenchant the public because the modern adversarial attitude of the media causes individuals to distrust the government (Campbell 2008). The media is yet another variable that affects the way voters are influenced by campaigns, candidates, and issues. Strategic campaigns have ties and relationships with the press that minimize negative or false information, and efficiently respond to criticisms and the biases of the media turning the attention of the public only to relevant information that helps form vote choice.

### Conclusions

Throughout this first chapter I have reviewed research conducted by scholars that wish to find out if campaigns are effective in persuading voters. With the varying results of the multitude of factors that influence vote choice, the evidence has created two schools of thought. Campaigns either: 1.) have minimal effects on persuading voters because of their tightly held predispositions or 2.) are strategic and have an influence on voting behavior and vote choice. With these conflicting theories stated and analyzed in this chapter, the evidence is still inconclusive.

Each study investigated in this chapter was difficult to dissect. This is because preexisting political notions are intrinsic to attitudes and skew the effectiveness of campaigning. Although this is unavoidable, in the forthcoming chapters of this thesis, I will explain my own research and conclusions about the 2008 campaign of President Barack Obama. Weighing all the factors and variables explored by the scholars in this chapter, I will be able to more efficiently and insightfully analyze the demographic make-up, including characteristics like gender, age, race, religion, region of residence, income, and education level of the United States during the campaign and contrast that with the actual outcome of the 2008 election. The election of 2008 came at time of war, economic crisis, and extreme disapproval of President Bush and the

Republican Party. And there was an overwhelming Democratic victory all across the country. I will then conclude whether (1) the 2008 election rendered a result merely of predispositions that led voters to vote in Obama's favor (and it essentially would not have mattered who the candidate was or how the campaign was run); (2) if the result of the election indicates a successful campaign that effectively swayed voters, leading some to vote for candidates different than those they have voted for in the past; or (3) if the Democratic victory was just a response to the economic climate and disapproval of President Bush and the Republican Party. The preface of my research with this initial chapter helps build a fundamental idea of the many (and at times, complicated) factors that influence vote choice.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: THE CANDIDATES, CAMPAIGNS, AND CONTEXT

The 2008 presidential election was unlike any other America had experienced before.

The “election sparked the interest of the American people like no other in the past 40 years – from the first caucuses and primaries in January all the way until Election Day” (Abramowitz 2010, 91). Attesting to this interest is the strikingly high voter turnout of an estimated 63%, which means that 131 million Americans voted on November 4, 2008. The campaigns were the longest and most expensive in history. This was also the first time a woman and African American were viable candidates to lead our nation. This chapter will serve as an overview of the 2008 presidential election providing a better understanding of the candidates, campaigns, and the context of the election. [This information](#) will enhance the [upcoming](#) chapters of this [thesis](#), [which](#) investigate the factors [contributing to](#) the election of Barack Obama.

### The Candidates

Americans look for specific qualities in their leaders. With the nature of America’s media and society, character evaluations have become a leading aspect that forms public opinion (Bennett 2009; Miller and Shanks 1996). As mentioned in the previous chapter, experience, qualification, ability, and personality have become the main [criteria](#) we use to evaluate candidates (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). In assessing the personality of political figures, competence, effectiveness, integrity, and empathy are the dominating decisive factors that influence vote choice. Thus, a fundamental understanding of the candidates themselves is vital when analyzing their campaigns.

### *John McCain and Sarah Palin*

John Sidney McCain III was born on a Naval Station in the Panama Canal Zone in 1939. “His father and grandfather were four-star Navy admirals, and like them McCain attended the Naval Academy in Annapolis” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 35). After graduating from the Naval Academy (at the very bottom of his class), at twenty-eight years old McCain was deployed to fight in the Vietnam War. In October of 1967, McCain was captured and tortured by the Vietnamese. He was a prisoner of war for five and a half years, before being released on March 14, 1973. McCain then served as the Navy liaison to the U.S. Senate and quickly found his penchant for politics. He moved to Arizona, served two terms as a Republican in the House of Representatives, and in 1986 successfully ran for the Senate, where he has remained since.

During his quarter-of-a-century in the Senate, McCain has flourished, becoming a leader among Republicans as well as Democrats. Not only is he an American hero, but also a maverick, refusing to conform to his Republican counterparts. His tendency to work with those from across the aisle has set him apart from fellow GOP members. McCain voted against the 2001 Bush tax cuts, is “the Senate’s most hawkish opponent of pork-barrel spending” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 35), and is adamant about tightening campaign finance regulations. These were all talking points McCain strategically mentioned during his campaign to separate himself from President Bush and fellow Republicans, and unlike Obama, he chose the public finance option to fund his campaign.

After running for the Republican presidential nomination in 2000 against George W. Bush unsuccessfully, McCain quickly became the main contender for the Republican nomination in 2008. This early start that began the day after he lost the 2000 nomination gave McCain a solid foundation for his viability (Balz and Johnson 2009). Just “days after the midterm election

[of 2006], he filed papers with the Federal Election Commission declaring himself a candidate” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 44). By June 2008, all other Republican nominees withdrew from the race, while Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton were still warring for a nomination from the Democrats, giving McCain an edge against his still-undecided Democratic competitor.

Experience was a prominent topic throughout the entire campaign. After dedicating his life to the United States, in the Navy and in Congress, experience was a selling point for the McCain campaign. In fact, the Republicans repetitively highlighted McCain’s expertise and experience, contrasting both with Obama’s inexperience. During the election “polls consistently showed the public believed the Arizona senator was more experienced than his rival” (Sizemore 2010, 21). However, McCain’s well seasoned past could not be isolated from his age of seventy-two, which sharply contrasted with the forty-seven year old Barack Obama. To level the Republican ticket, the McCain campaign needed to find a young and energetic vice presidential nominee.

In late August, John McCain announced that Sarah Palin would be his Republican running mate. The Alaska Governor had been virtually unknown prior to his selection; however, she garnered a lot of attention for the McCain-Palin ticket and “allowed John McCain to reclaim control of the news cycle” (Sizemore 2010, 24). Palin instantly reenergized the Republican base. Her conservative stance on social issues appealed to many Republicans and having a woman on the Republican ticket could have “help[ed] McCain win over former supporters of Hilary Clinton who would otherwise vote Democratic” (Sizemore 2010, 24). Palin was also learned in one of America’s leading domestic issues: the consumption and price of energy and gas (Hall Jamieson 2009).

Having just two years of experience as Governor and none on a federal level, Sarah Palin's vigor and youth could not be separated from her inexperience (Sizemore 2010). Her interviews, notably one with Katie Couric, and appearances demonstrated her lack of qualification. This was particularly inconvenient for the McCain camp, given that Obama's inexperience was their main source of attack. However, Sarah Palin was exciting, vigorous, and accessible, making her a great running mate for John McCain.

#### *Barack Obama and Joe Biden*

Born in 1961, Barack Obama led a very different life than his opponent, John McCain. His Kenyan father and American mother separated at a very young age; [Obama](#) was raised in Hawaii by his maternal grandparents. Throughout his life Obama excelled in school, graduating at the top of his class from Harvard Law School. After becoming a civil rights attorney, constitutional law professor, and community organizer for low-income communities in Chicago, Obama's dedication led him to the Illinois State Senate. [While running for U.S. Senate in 2004, Obama](#) was honored as the keynote speaker of the Democratic National Convention. [Thus, 2004 was a pivotal year for him, propelling](#) his national political career. [Shortly after the address, he](#) won a seat in the U.S. Senate.

During his time in the Senate, Obama famously voted against continuing funding for the War in Iraq. A loyal Democrat, he voted progressively on immigration issues and maintained his pro-choice stance. After just two years in the Senate, on January 16, 2007, he declared himself a candidate in the 2008 presidential election (Balz and Johnson 2009). Although his resume was significantly thinner than McCain's, it was Obama's sense of newness, excitement, and youthful energy that appealed to America.

Ageism and racism were frequently discussed in the media during the election. Although young, Senator Obama faced adversity being African American (technically, he is biracial but always identified himself as black). Obama's race was something he never explicitly mentioned on the campaign trail, but it could not have gone unnoticed. And for the first time in the United States, an African American man became president. Obama's youthfulness highlighted his inexperience, but also alluded to his disjuncture from Washington, which in 2008 was certainly a positive. However, the Obama camp knew they needed a strong experienced Washington veteran as his running mate to help balance out the Democratic ticket.

Joe Biden had the experience Obama was looking for; he has the "seasoned Washington hands whose experience would lend gravitas [and credibility] to the ticket." (Sizemore 2010, 21) Biden was a leader in the Senate for more than thirty years. He was the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and Biden's expertise in the subject strengthened Obama's domestically focused platform. Unlike Sarah Palin, Biden did not cause a media frenzy; he was the type of running mate that strategists and pollsters were expecting. Together with Obama the two had diverse qualifications and experiences that made them a strategic and balanced pair and fair opponents of the McCain-Palin team.

### *The Campaigns*

There were many pivotal moments throughout the 2008 election. Caucuses, primaries, and conventions exist to ensure that only the most capable individuals run for president. With the support of their respective parties, Obama and McCain ran tireless campaigns. The lengthy campaigning process led to many critical moments. Although they ran campaigns with

completely different platforms and policies, the two candidates interacted with voters from across the country, informing them about their plans for the United States.

### *Nominating Conventions*

Unlike John McCain who “became the presumptive Republican nominee in March” (Holloway 2009, 30) after [Mitt Romney](#) and [Rudy Giuliani](#) dropped out of the race, Barack Obama had to overcome Hilary Clinton. A strong contender as New York Senator and former First Lady, Clinton was determined. It wasn’t until June of 2008 [that](#) Obama bested Clinton for their party’s nomination (Balz and Johnson 2009; Holloway 2009). On August 23, Obama announced that Delaware Senator, Joe Biden, would be his running mate (Hall Jamieson 2009). The Democratic National Convention commenced just two days later, ending on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August. It took place in Denver, Colorado commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city hosting the [convention](#) in 1908 (Balz and Johnson 2009).

On the first night, Michelle Obama introduced her husband to America with his emotional journey, from being “the son of a single mother... all the way to the White House” (Holloway 2009, 23). Former President Bill Clinton, his wife Hilary, Al Gore, and a dying Ted Kennedy all lent their support to Senator Obama by speaking at the [convention](#). In front of 75,000 people, with 40 million Americans watching,<sup>8</sup> Obama set the tone for the rest of his campaign during his acceptance address. His motivational speech assured that he was the only person that “could restore America’s promise [and] bring hope and change...He then described his policy responses on energy, education, health care, social security, equal pay for equal work,

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<sup>8</sup> David Bauder, “Democratic National Convention Ratings: 38 Million Watch Obama’s Acceptance Speech,” *HuffingtonPost.com*, 29 August 2008.

family leave, bankruptcy law, and the need to remake government bureaucracy” (Holloway 2009, 28), while also mentioning the failures of the Bush administration and the Republicans.

A day after the [convention](#) ended, McCain announced that Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin would be his vice-presidential running mate (Hall Jamieson 2009). As mentioned in the previous chapter, a ‘bump’ in public opinion typically occurs after a party convention, and it is usually more significant after the first convention. In 2008, despite holding their convention later, the ‘bump’ after the Republican National Convention was higher (Abramowitz 2010). This may be related to the excitement that the Palin selection generated immediately after the [Democratic convention](#). Because the [Republican convention](#) was just days later, starting on September 1, “the timing also gave the Republicans the advantage of responding to the Democrats’ convention strategy and the opportunity to cut short any positive impact from the Democratic convention in television coverage or public response” (Holloway 2009, 30).

Although the Republicans initially had an advantage at their convention due to timing, it quickly backfired. The first night of the [convention](#) had to be scaled back because Hurricane Gustav had just devastated the Gulf Coast. President Bush and Vice President Cheney were not in attendance and “McCain suspended all convention activities other than official business required for the nomination process” (Holloway 2009, 32). Another challenge the Republicans faced during their convention was their unity. The Republicans were not unified in their nomination because some felt that McCain worked too often with Democrats, was not conservative enough, [and/or](#) was too outspoken against President George W. Bush. Palin, however, became the star of the Republican National Convention. She was equally as youthful and energetic as Barack Obama, but also a regular mother of five that came from a hardworking family.

The message of the Republican National Convention was patriotism, leadership, and experience, all qualities that McCain possesses. He opened his acceptance address with “I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else’s” (Sizemore 2010, 27). Speakers praised McCain for his service and bipartisanship while also attacking Obama for his inexperience and transparent speaking skills. By September 4, when the Republican National Convention was through, all of America knew that John McCain was a ‘maverick.’ By September 4, all of America also found out that Sarah Palin’s seventeen-year-old daughter was pregnant out of wedlock, and that ignited America’s (and the media’s) frenzy surrounding Sarah Palin.

Nomination conventions have evolved over the years. “In the pre-reform era, a vigorously contested nomination battle [like the one between Clinton and Obama] would have been resolved at the convention, but in 2008, party rules all but ensure that nomination fights are settled well ahead of time” and the party nominee is now known for months prior to the convention (Sizemore 2010, 27). Some believe that party conventions are nothing more than marketing tools that seek to win over the electorate, neglecting delegate debates and party uniformity (Sizemore 2010).

Compared to most election years, 2008 was a bit different. Polls indicated that the nomination conventions did have some resonance with voters. “Both campaigns solidified support from their own parties through the conventions: one poll [conducted by Cohen and Balz] reported 85% of Democrats backed Obama; 88% of Republicans supported McCain; a second poll [by Miller] verified that both candidates secured their base with 95% of self-described conservative Republicans supporting McCain and 93% of self-described liberal Democrats backing Obama” (Holloway 2009, 41). The Republican convention got Republicans more



excited about their party; 47% of Republicans said their excitement about the election doubled after the convention (Holloway 2009). Obama's support from Hilary Clinton proved to be extremely valuable; 78% of those that previously backed Clinton lent their support to Obama after the convention. Despite some setbacks, McCain gathered more support from his base and undecided voters. As Holloway (2009) points out, prior to the convention Obama had a 32-point advantage in the polls, afterwards this gap shrunk by 20 points to only a 12-point lead. Other polls showed that McCain favored well with Independents also, gaining 12% of their vote, and 9-14% among Democrats. Unlike conventions in the past, those of 2008 were able to attract voters outside their party base, indicating the widespread interest and excitement America felt toward the presidential election.

#### *Presidential and Vice Presidential Debates*

The presidential debates usually attract the widest audience during any given election. Since 1992, there have consistently been three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate (Abramowitz 2010; Friedenberg 2009). Because of the nature of the media and politics today, however, debates have become focused on performance rather than substance, thus, most candidates choose safe, strategic, and well-rehearsed responses. The effects of these debates are debatable themselves. The 2008 presidential debates were typical. Only the Republican and Democratic nominees were asked to participate and the format was simple. After being given two minutes to respond to a question, "the candidates would have an open discussion of five minutes on the question, before moving to the next" (Friedenberg 2009, 69).

The first debate was on Friday, September 26<sup>th</sup> in Oxford, Mississippi. This Friday night television spot was unusual because viewership would be particularly low, but a smaller

audience appeased both campaigns. The “total audience, across the 11 channels that carried it, of 52.4 million, [was] down 16% from the audience that heard or watched the first debate in 2004” (Friedenberg 2009, 70). Mediated by Jim Lehrer, the initial debate was scheduled to be on foreign policy (Hall Jamieson 2009). However, in the days prior to the first debate it had become clear that the United States was in the midst of a financial crisis with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, government seizure of Frannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and the acquisition of Merrill Lynch by Bank of America. McCain even suspended all campaigning activity in these days to focus on the government’s bailout plan. The Commission on Presidential Debates then decided to incorporate this unfortunately relevant topic into the first debate, along with foreign affairs. The first 40% of the debate was focused on the economic crisis and the latter 60% on foreign policy.

Each candidate had consistent themes throughout both topics in this first debate. Both Obama and McCain kept their responses and discussions safe. Their economic recovery plans were simple and expected, lacking both specifics and implementation strategies. McCain called upon his experiences in Washington and his premonitions about the mortgage industry. Ironically, he also made it a point to separate himself from Washington, the Republicans, and the Bush administration claiming to be a ‘reformer’ and a ‘leader’ to prove he was a candidate that could instate change. Obama continually “went back to his basic thesis that the Bush administration, aided and supported by Senator McCain, had caused our economic woes and was not playing fair with middle-class Americans...[This theme] appealed to his base of committed Democratic voters... [and] to voters seeking change” (Friedenberg 2009, 70-71). “Both men seemed well versed in economic issues... [but] Obama was consistently more articulate and

seemed to be in better control of himself” (Friedenberg 2008, 76) during the first subject of the debate.

On the topic of foreign affairs, McCain’s expertise was instantly exposed. His theme of experience led him to recall his work in the Senate, the military, and Iraq, while also critiquing Obama’s inexperience “suggesting that he would rely on Biden for foreign policy and war policy” (Friedenberg 2009, 80). Obama highlighted the failures of the Bush administration in foreign policy, citing the costs of the wars President Bush and a Republican-led Congress ignited and their debacles. McCain bested Obama on the topic of foreign affairs; his first-hand experience and knowledge could not compete with Obama’s attacks on the Bush administration.

Nothing controversial or dramatic ensued during the first debate. Polls taken after indicated that Obama fared better in this setting with an audience of more than 50 million people. Although Obama was ahead in the polls prior to this initial debate, afterward his advantage over McCain grew, from an original lead of 3.7 [percentage points](#) to 4.3 [points](#) two days later, to 5.1 [points](#) one week after (Friedenberg 2009).

Just a few days later, with about a month until Election Day, the vice presidential debate was mediated by Gwen Ifill in St. Louis, Missouri. This would be the only debate for Senator Biden and Governor Palin; the format of the debate allotted a 90-second response with two minutes following for discussion. With 69.9 million viewers watching, this event had the largest audience of any other vice presidential debate and all presidential debates (including the three between Obama and McCain) since 1980 (Friedenberg 2009). “Apparently, many members of the public were eager to see how Sarah Palin would do... in the aftermath of her widely criticized interview with CBS news anchor Katie Couric” that aired just a few nights before (Abramowitz 2010, 102).

The economy, taxes, foreign policy, and Iraq were all topics of discussion at this vice presidential debate. Biden and Palin often repeated the resolutions their respective running mates mentioned in the previous debate. And as expected, Biden blamed the Bush administration for the failures America was facing, distancing himself from the Republicans, and Palin distanced herself from Washington and at times, from the questions she was presented with. The Governor often ‘danced around’ and even avoided answering questions using that “time to present her own background and accomplishments” (Friedenberg 2009, 85). Biden, known for making memorable gaffes, effectively composed himself for the debate and had a strong performance. The two candidates made several factual errors but it was a successful debate overall that certainly reached a lot of voters.

The second presidential debate was a bit different than the first. It had a town hall style forum, with questions from the live audience, some sent in by Americans, and a few from moderator Tom Brokaw. Set in Nashville, Tennessee on October 8, 63 million Americans tuned in to watch the debate (Friedenberg 2009). There was a lot of redundancy from the first debate. McCain and Obama responded to questions with the same solutions and plans, reciting phrases identical to those said just twelve days earlier during their first debate. They were equally as cautious and vague, even when responding to specific questions from Americans and like the first, there was no obvious victor.

On the morning of the second debate Obama was ahead in the polls by 5.5 points. A few polls showed Obama gaining from 1.5% to 5.5% after the debate, and another indicated his support decreased by 1.5 points. The consensus of six different polls showed a 7.6 [percentage point](#) lead, which demonstrated a 2.1 [point](#) boost in public opinion for Obama just three days

**Comment [o1]:** These %'s should also be changed to “percentage points” or simply “points.”

after the debate. About a week later, going into the third debate Obama had a lead of 7.5 points (Friedenberg 2009).

The third and final presidential debate on October 15 in Hampstead, New York was mediated by Bob Schieffer in the same original format as the initial debate and dedicated to domestic issues. Like the previous debate and the one between Palin and Biden, the two candidates repeated many of the same themes once again. McCain discussed his experiences, capabilities, and expertise, even in domestic policies. Obama again held the Bush administration accountable and responsible for the dismal economy, reminding the electorate that McCain was attached to President Bush because they are members of the same Republican party, and that America desperately needs change that he, along with his fellow Democrats, could bring. Unexpectedly, McCain and Obama both cited specific numbers in their economic recovery plan and each candidate was more interactive with one another than ever before. This was McCain's best debate performance, and it look as though it influenced Obama's lead from 7.5 to 5 points; but days later McCain's gain regressed leaving Obama with the upper hand by 7.4 points (Friedenberg 2009).

"Senator Obama's lead had approximately doubled from 3.7% in the *Real Clear Politics* poll average on the morning of the first debate to 7.4% days after the last debate" (Friedenberg 2009, 97). However,

at least two factors may have contributed to Obama's growing lead. First, the economic news continued to be bad. As the magnitude of the current problem grew, it is likely that the desire for change among the voters also grew.... Second, the rationale for selecting McCain over Obama had, in large part, been built on the fact that McCain was the more experienced, more seasoned leader. Yet, as in the first debate, Obama was holding his own. Indeed, he seemed more fluent, perhaps more confident, than McCain (Friedenberg 2009, 92).

Comment [o2]: Should this be "selecting"?

It was certain that there were other events responsible for Obama's significant lead other than his performance in his three debates. Between the first and last debate, the financial crisis and the economy worsened, and the Dow Jones shockingly dropped "777 points, the largest single-day loss in its history" (Hall Jamieson 2009, 11). Americans continued struggling to make payments to debtors and tired of seeing billions of tax dollars being spent in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran, and were tired of the failed leadership of President Bush. Simultaneously, they were also being exposed to more aggressive campaign advertisements, more campaign information, and election news, altering the role the presidential debates had in shifting the polling data. Then again, the debates and campaign materials quite possibly could have had no bearing at all on the opinions of Americans.

### Context of the Election

The political environment of 2008 was not pleasant. The government was plagued with debt and war. The economy was the worst it had been since the Great Depression, with unusually high levels of unemployment. With increasing gas prices and the crisis on Wall Street just weeks before the election, the economy became the most important issue for voters. The war in Iraq seemed to be idle after six years and billions of tax dollars. It seemed as though issues with immigration, social security, and healthcare grew more daunting. The public held President Bush responsible and his dismal approval rating indicated that Americans were concerned about the future of their nation. The election of 2008 proposed an opportunity to overcome the challenges America was facing with new leadership.

### *The Policies of President George W. Bush*

Elected in 2000, President Bush had a successful first term. He was praised for his handling of the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, receiving his highest approval rating during this unfortunate period in the United States. Bush's War on Terror that instantly ensued led the U.S. to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He created the Department of Homeland Security, funneled billions of dollars into the Department of Defense, and was largely supported by Congress. This support guided the passage of the Patriot Act of 2001, which "greatly expanded the powers of the federal government in the field of law enforcement, particularly in relation to terrorism and aliens" (Vile 2009, 65), but also received a lot of criticism for violating the civil liberties of Americans. Congress also passed his No Child Left Behind Act early in 2001 but it too became unpopular. Regardless, Bush fared well during his first four years and was re-elected in 2004.

By the mid-term elections in 2006, Bush's approval ratings were rapidly sinking. Illegal immigration was getting out of the control of the government, and his solution the hundreds of miles of fencing that went up along the Mexico-U.S. border was not the best approach. During his eight years in office, little environmental progress was made; the Bush administration refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol and was not convinced about global warming (Houghton 2009). When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast in August of 2005 killing over eighteen hundred Americans, Bush's lack of leadership and response worsened the devastation. More "evidence of torture and human rights abuses was uncovered" (Houghton 2009, 122) in Guantanamo Bay and prisons in Iraq, like Abu Ghraib.

The wars were a huge concern of Americans going into the 2008 elections. Since no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq, many Americans no longer saw the motive

behind the billions of dollars being spent each month; as of June 2008 the Iraq war cost \$646 billion.<sup>9</sup> [Together](#), Iraq and Afghanistan had cost taxpayers over a trillion dollars. The national debt was growing from the two wars and tens of thousands of troops returned home with devastating injuries. The disapproving sentiment was exacerbated because it did not appear that the U.S. was making any progress Iraq or Afghanistan.

The economy was plummeting; the ‘Bush tax cuts’ polarized the wealth in America, the GDP was falling, and unemployment, along with the national deficit, was rising (Crotty 2009). In 2008 Bush’s approval rating was its lowest, with “just 31% of Americans approv[ing] of how President Bush [was] handling his job”<sup>10</sup> which could have been the reason behind his (and Vice President Cheney’s) noticeable absence on the campaign trail with fellow Republican John McCain.

### *The Economic Crisis*

The issues Americans were dealing with helped shape the evaluation of each candidate in the 2008 presidential election. With a major recession and a financial meltdown during Bush’s last year in office, the economy became the most important issue for Americans in 2008 (Crotty 2009).

In 2008 the national debt was \$455 billion, the wars and Bush tax cuts, which decreased revenue for the government, were the main contributors to this astounding debt. The GDP declined for the first time in twenty-five years (Généreux 2009). The U.S. dollar lost significant value overseas and other nations had become weary about the loans they were lending to the U.S.

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<sup>9</sup> David Goldman, “Iraq [War Could Cost Taxpayers \\$2.7 Trillion](#),” *CNN.com*, 12 June 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Steinhauser, “Poll: Bush’s Popularity Hits New Low,” *CNN.com*, 12 March 2008.



treasury. [In October,](#) just before the election, 5.4 million U.S. citizens were unemployed which comprised 6.5% of the workforce (United States Department of Labor 2008).

Because so many Americans were unemployed, they struggled [to make](#) payments on their mortgages. More than three million homes were foreclosed as a result in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Major financial institutions and lenders then struggled to stay afloat with such a large cut in their revenue stream. The collapse of Frannie Mae and Freddie Mac put “a liability of more than \$5 trillion of mortgages on the backs of U.S. taxpayers” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 345). Investors of all sorts saw their assets drop, “retirement savings lost \$2 trillion in 15 months” (Balz and Johnson 2009, 350).

Major financial institutions and lenders then struggled to stay afloat with large cuts in their revenue stream. To help prevent any further economic disaster, the government bailed out some of the country’s largest corporations. Although the House originally rejected it on October 3, Congress passed the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, which had approved the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). The legislation designated \$700 billion to the country’s largest financial institutions. It was targeted to help mortgage lenders survive because the housing aspect of the crisis was the most detrimental to the U.S. economy but also extended funds to automobile companies, banks, and insurance companies. American Express, Chrysler, General Motors, AIG, Citigroup, Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, and Goldman Sachs along with dozens of other financial institutions received the monies from the recovery package. Despite the warnings that Henry Paulson, Secretary of the Treasury, and Ben Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve had given President Bush for weeks, it seemed as though America was in a panic, and American taxpayers were in a fury (Balz and Johnson 2009).

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<sup>11</sup> Stephanie Armour, “2008 Foreclosure Filings Set Record,” *USAToday.com*, 3 February 2009.

### Conclusions

By Election Day, Americans had a lot of issues to consider when casting their ballots. The final influx of campaigning made both candidates unavoidable. With the debates and conventions, most voters had heard all the information they needed to make an informed decision. The financial crisis made the economy the front-running issue for most Americans. It was apparent that the polls were shifting in favor of Barack Obama going into October, but the reasons behind this shift are not yet clear. It could have been the effective campaigning he was conducting across the country, his acceptance address at the Democratic National Convention, or his performance in the debates. Although the economy became the most important issue, both candidates announced recovery plans, and both plans received support from some American voters.

It became apparent with the public disapproval of President Bush that the U.S. was ready for a new and different leader. Both Obama and McCain would have been new leaders, but McCain's tie to the Republican Party, the same of President Bush, made the two appear more similar than not. Thus, the exact motives behind the majority vote that went to Obama need to be explored because there are so many variables that affect vote choice. The rest of this thesis, which will begin with an analysis of voting behavior in the United States, seeks to find which factors most influence vote choice, which in 2008 could have been effective campaigning, the political and economic context of the election, or the predispositions that make individuals more inclined to favor a particular candidate.

### CHAPTER THREE: VOTING RATES AND VOTE CHOICE OF SOCIAL GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES

Understanding the context of America during the 2008 presidential election is equally as important as understanding Americans in 2008. In a time when Americans were worried about the economy, skeptical about the government, and uncertain about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there were many issues to consider on Election Day. The growing diversity of the United States left numerous positions and stances on the issues and the candidates. Gender, race, ethnicity, religion, region of residence, income, and education level can affect the way individuals analyze an election and make vote decisions. Because of this diversity and the effects certain characteristics can have on vote choice, knowing the demographic make-up of the United States during the 2008 election is crucial in assessing the effects of John McCain and Barack Obama's presidential campaigns. As mentioned in Chapter 1, "group partisanship is highly stable" (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 136-7). By presenting the turnout rates of social groups one will be able to measure their strength in the election. This will be especially relevant in the following chapter, which discusses the efforts put forth by the Obama campaign to mobilize likely voters.

As this chapter will demonstrate, there was a large Democratic shift in the United States in 2008. This shift proves that favorability of a particular political party is not always consistent from election to election. This also proves that voters are not as predictable as the limited effects theory posits and essentially discredits the theory when applying it to the 2008 presidential election. The historical voting behaviors and patterns of specific social groups juxtaposed with the break down of vote choice in 2008 will provide the social-political essence of voting in the United States during this election.

### *Demographic Make-Up of the United States and Turnout in 2008*

In 2008 the United States had 304,060,000 residents. Two hundred twenty five million were of age but only 206 million were eligible to vote in 2008; and just 146 million were registered (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). The overall voting rate increased by 5.3% since 2004, which added about 5 million more voters to the electorate. On November 4, 2008, 131 million Americans, 63.6% of the eligible population, cast their ballot (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Diversity is inherent to such a large population and the voting patterns of social groups in the United States are distinguishable in most presidential elections – 2008 was no different. Knowing this, campaigns strategically address and tailor themselves to target key demographics during elections. Gender, age, race, religion, region of residence, income, and education level are the principal segments of the population that have noticeable voting tendencies. This section provides evidence of the diversity in the U.S. electorate to identify the strong presence of these groups in the social-political arena and in elections.

#### *Gender*

Women, making up more than half of the population in the United States, have always, even before the women's suffrage movement, been vocal in their political preferences. Women were also viable candidates in 2008, with Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton running against Obama for the Democratic nomination and Governor Sarah Palin as McCain's Republican running mate. Although both women ultimately lost, 2008 marked a significant milestone in gender equality for America.

In 2008 there were 107.2 million women eligible to vote. They outnumbered men by 8.5 million, representing 52% of all potential voters. About 73% of the eligible females were indeed

also registered to vote, outnumbering men once again by 10 million. The voting rate among women in 2008 increased compared to that of 2004, whereas the voting rate of men decreased in 2008. Of the 131 million Americans that voted on Election Day, women accounted for 53.7% with 70.4 million. Table 3.1 shows the breakdown of turnout in this election year by gender. The most important message from this data is the comparison of the percentage of citizen population and the percentage of votes that each sex was accountable for in the election. It is evident that although there were 4% more women than men in the U.S., an even larger proportion of the electorate that voted was female. This indicates the overrepresentation of women on Election Day. This is typical in presidential elections; but it makes another statement about the progress the United States has made in the past century with gender equality (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

### *Age*

The youth vote was predicted to reach unprecedented levels in 2008. Although turnout among younger voters did not reach quite as high as what experts had anticipated, more than half of 18-29 year olds voted in 2008, which made this “the second straight presidential election where young citizens significantly increased their voting rates” (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). The youth was also more particularly engaged in 2008, with an increase in political interest, participation (by 8.3%) and activity. There were 43.8 million eligible young voters (18-29 years old) in 2008, of which, 61.1% were registered to vote and 51.1% reported voting.

In 2008 there was a clear and consistent direct relationship between likeliness to vote and age – the higher one’s age, the more likely one was to vote. Table 3.2 shows the proportionality of the percentage of the population each age group accounted for in the U.S. compared to the percentage of those that voted in 2008. Voters in 2008 were disproportionately represented by

age. Those 44 and older were overrepresented, whereas those ages 18-44 were underrepresented on Election Day; however the increase of interest and participation among younger voters in the 2008 presidential election was monumental (U.S. Census Bureau 2009).

Younger voters were responsible for the most significant increase in turnout among the different age groups totaling 51.1%. This was up 8.3% since 2004 and also three percentage points above the national increase in voter turnout. The next sequential age group of 30-44 year olds had a higher turnout of 61.8% of the 52.5 million potential voters in this category. Forty five to fifty nine year olds continued the upward trend with a turnout of 68.5% on Election Day. And those 60 and over had the highest voter turnout of all the age groups with 70.8%.

#### *Race and Hispanic Origin*

The voters of 2008 were “the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history, with nearly one-in-four votes cast by non-whites” (Lopez and Taylor 2009). The turnout rate among African Americans increased 4.7% when compared to 2004. Barack Obama’s viability as the first African American and his campaign efforts that specifically targeted African Americans attests for this increase of black voters in 2008. Similarly, the voter turnout among Hispanics increased by 2.7%, as the white voting rate decreased 1%, compared with 2004. The population of all eligible voters increased in 2008 from 2004 by 4.6%, whereas the population of potential Hispanic voters increased by 21.4% or 3.4 million (Lopez and Taylor 2009). The growing population of minorities in the U.S. is consistent; and the gradual increase in African American and Hispanic voting rates since 1996 is an important indicator that their electoral voice is not going unheard.

Although the white vote decreased compared to 2004, they were still overrepresented in the electorate but, by just one percentage point. The striking increase in participation by African Americans also led their vote to be an overrepresented voice in the election, making up just 12.1% of the voting age population, and attributing to 12.3% of all those that voted in 2008. Despite the increase of turnout by Hispanics, they still did not reach a proportional level of voter participation. Table 3.3 designates the presence of these demographics in the U.S. population and the strength they had in the 2008 election.

### *Religion*

The United States was founded upon the principle of freedom to practice any religion (or none at all). Centuries later, this freedom is still exercised, and a plethora of religions are practiced throughout communities across all of America. Protestants, Catholics, and Jews are the three dominant religions in the U.S. today. The different denominations of these religions vary, however many of these smaller segmented religions are divided among ethnicity and race. Ethnoreligious traditions<sup>12</sup> are engrained in race and ethnicity; for the purpose of this section, analyzing the three main religious sects (including all the relative denominations) will best serve in understanding the demographic make-up of the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

The voting electorate in 2008 was denser with voters from ethnoreligious groups and with those that have no religious affiliation at all (Smidt et al. 2010). Protestants and other non-Catholic Christians comprised 54.9% of the population, 22.5% were Catholic, 1.2% Jewish, 4.8% of the U.S. was another faith, and 16.7% was unaffiliated with any religious organization

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<sup>12</sup> Ethnoreligions are religious groups that have members of specific ethnicities

<sup>13</sup> Because not all Americans identify with a religion, and it is not a category that the U.S. Census Bureau collects data on, the information in this section is composed slightly differently.

(Henry Institute 2008). The highest turnout among Protestants was 73% with Mainline Centrists Protestants. The average of all Protestant and other non- Catholic Christians was 63%. Similarly, the Catholic average was 63.5% where Non-Hispanic Traditionalists, a sect of Catholicism, voted most frequently with 80%. As one would expect, the large Protestant and Catholic vote, which encompassed more than three-quarters of the population, had about same voting rate as the entire nation. Jews, the smallest religious group, had the highest voter turnout rate of a remarkable 88%, as seen on Table 3.4. Americans that were not Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish but were unaffiliated with a religion or another faith made up 21.5% of the population. These individuals were underrepresented in the electorate of 2008, especially those that did not identify with any religious institution. Religious sentiments in communities, although not as strong as they once were, still have a large influence on the lives of most Americans. However, even more so than indicating political participation, religious identity is an even stronger indicator of political preferences, which will be deeply investigated in the next section of this chapter.

### *Region of Residence*

Geographically, voters tend to vote relative to their surroundings, and as reported in Chapter 1, even non-native voters tend to adopt the political preferences of their new environment. Thus, many voting patterns and trends originate through regions of residence, including participation. The diverse nature of United States is attributed to its different racial and ethnic groups as well as its urban, suburban, and rural regions. The Northeast, Midwest, South, and West all had similar voting rates with 62.9%, 66.3%, 62.6%, and 63.3% respectively. The Electoral College system typically (with the exception of Nebraska and Maine) does not divide the votes of a state among candidates. It instead grants the winner of a given state the total



number of electoral votes designated to that particular state. Thus, the majority of the research done on the political geography in this section will be focused on the 50 states and the District of Columbia. However, despite the Electoral College, this paper will compare statistics of the popular vote, because it gives a better understanding of the population of the U.S.

With a national voter turnout rate of 63.6%, all 50 states, including DC, fell within the voting rate range of 51.8-75%. Hawaii had the lowest voter turnout for the second consecutive presidential election, which was particularly surprising considering it is the home state to candidate Obama. Minnesota had the highest voter participation in 2008 with 75% of all eligible voters casting ballots on Election Day. The discrepancy in voter turnout among the states is explained by the cultural and societal differences across America that ignite political awareness and participation. However, it is the nonvoting citizens of these states with shockingly low turnout rates that allow voters to have a disproportional strength in their elections.

If the United States facilitated popular vote elections, California would have accounted for 10.3% of the electorate that voted in 2008. Even with such political strength, voters from California would still have been underrepresented in a popular vote since they account for 10.5% of the citizen population. With the Electoral College system, California is designated 55 electoral votes (out of 538). This system allots California control of 10.2% of all electoral votes, which still did not accurately represent Californians in 2008, shorting them .3%.

Alaska, Washington DC, Delaware, Wyoming, Vermont, Montana, and North and South Dakota each have three electoral votes. This grants each of these states .56% worth of the 538 electoral votes. However, Alaska, DC, Wyoming, Vermont, and North and South Dakota each accounted for just .2% of the voting population, and Delaware and Montana attributed .3% and 4%, respectively. The popular vote of 2008, in Alaska, DC, Delaware, Wyoming, Vermont, and

North Dakota was accurately represented the population, claiming the same proportion of the population as voters. This is accuracy of representation was not experienced in many of the fifty states, as shown in Table 3.5. Along with California, Texas, Tennessee, and New York were also underrepresented on Election Day. States with high voting rates, like Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan and Maine, were overrepresented by as much as .3% in 2008, indicating the effects of such a wide range of participation rates in elections.

It is evident that the Electoral College does not accurately or proportionally represent American voters. However, it is also evident that even with a popular voting system, American citizens do not vote proportionally. Thus, a popular vote would not entirely rectify the misrepresentation that results from the Electoral College system implemented in the U.S. The increase of participation in 2008 increased the accuracy of representation in the United States, however, the only way to ensure this precision is to reach a voting rate that is 100%, which, unfortunately, is not foreseeable in America's future.

### *Income*

Income is another facet of American society that segregates citizens. Evidence shows that families with similar incomes share other similarities, voting tendencies being one of them. There are a lot of inferences that are intrinsic with income: race, ethnicity, residence, and education level. This section will focus solely on participation of American families according to their income.<sup>14</sup> In 2008 36.5% (of the families that reported their income) earned more than \$100,000 a year and 10.2% made less than \$20,000. Voter turnout was directly related to

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<sup>14</sup> Of the 153 million family members in the U.S. only 126 million reported their income to the Census Bureau. These statistics were conducted using the figure of 126,066,00 as the total number of family members that reported income.

income; the lowest income bracket had just 51.9% participation, and then increased respectively with each interval (with the exception of \$75,000-99,999) to the highest income level, which had a voting rate of 73.1%. Table 3.6 shows the progress of this increase, but the percentage of the electorate that voted on Election Day is not fully accurate because 27 million family members did not report their income to the U.S. Census. These statistics represents the percentage of those that *did* report their income to the Census. Americans earning over \$100,000 a year had the most significant change in turnout when compared to 2004. The voting rate of the wealthiest Americans decreased by 8.2% in 2008. Those with an income of less than \$20,000 had the largest increase in turnout, by 3.6%. If turnout among those making more than \$100,000 had not decreased as much as it did, this direct relationship would have been consistent across each income level. The voter turnout of the different income levels will become more important later in this chapter as it will discuss the voting trends of citizens according to their earnings (U.S. Census Bureau 2009)

### *Education*

Education level has always been a key indicator of interest in politics. Like income and age, education too was directly related voter participation. Citizens that had attended some high school but never graduated had a low voting rate of just 39.4%. This segment of the population accounted for 11.2% of the U.S. but only 6.9% of these individuals were represented on Election Day, as indicated in Table 3.7. The turnout among each level of education decreased when compared to 2004. Americans with a high school degree or less were underrepresented at the polls on November 4, 2008. Those that had attended college (not even necessarily graduating) voted at a rate above the national average of 68.0%. Those with advanced degrees had a voter

turnout of 82.7%, which was one of the highest voting rates of any demographic in the country, indicating influence that education has on electoral participation. Accounting for just 9% of the population, the electorate in 2008 consisted of 11.8% of individuals that held advanced degrees. However, citizens with Bachelor's degrees were the most overrepresented individuals on Election Day making up just 18.5% of the population but had a turnout rate of 77.0% accounting for 22.4% of voters, which is 3.9 percentage points more than what would have been proportionate (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). The dominance of Americans that are well-educated in the 2008 election demonstrates the influence that education has on political awareness, as well as the need to inform uneducated citizens.

#### *Voting Patterns of Demographics: Historically and in 2008*

Social groups have the ability to change the outcome of American elections. The influence of these groups is ingrained in their traditional and historical voting patterns. Knowing this, campaigns strategically target demographic groups throughout the U.S. However, voting patterns and trends only materialize when these groups show up to the polls on Election Day. Understanding the historical voting behaviors of social groups proved to benefit Obama's campaigning efforts in 2008, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

The presidential election of 2008 was, in many ways, unique and historical. Some of the voting trends of social groups in America were expected, while others were less typical. Obama's victory with 365 electoral votes from 66.8 millions Americans was 53% of the popular vote. McCain fell short of Obama with 173 electoral votes and just 46% of the popular vote (Sabato 2010). The descriptions of voting rates in this chapter lay the groundwork for its concluding section, which compares the voting trends in 2008 to prior elections.

## *Gender*

The differences among the voting preferences of men and women are referred to as the ‘gender gap,’ which “may have even existed since the start of female suffrage” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 325). Experts have found that the difference of political preferences is rooted in the schism of gender behaviors. For psychological, sociological, and biological reasons women tend to be more compassionate and less aggressive (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef and Lin 2004; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Sanbonmatsu 2010). This makes them more liberal with issues like welfare, racial equality, healthcare, childcare, and education and more conservative with gun control, defense, and capital punishment. With this ideology, women would undoubtedly be more likely to align themselves with Democrats, due to the principal policies and liberal nature of this party.

In fact, women today are more likely to favor Democrats and identify themselves as Democrats. However, this was not always the case. Early studies of the presidential vote indicate “the gap initially favored the Republicans. Not until the 1960s did it turn Democratic” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 325-6); but, it was not until the 1980s when the gender gap fully emerged (Box-Steffensmeier, De Boef and Lin 2004; Miller and Shanks 1996). Throughout the 1980s Democratic presidential candidates fared better with women by about seven percentage points. This gender gap continued across the 1990s, peaking in 1996 with Clinton attaining 12 percentage points more of the female vote than his opponent. In 2000 and 2004, the gender disparity favored Democrats by nine and seven percentage points, respectively, which marks the return of the average gender gap as experienced in the 1980s (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

In 2008, Obama carried more votes than McCain with both men and women. Forty nine percent of men favored Obama, compared to the 48% that preferred McCain. Women preferred Obama to McCain by 13 percentage points. Table 3.8 shows the voting differences among the two genders in the 2004 and 2008 presidential contests. As previously mentioned, the typical gender gap usually indicates that women favor Democrats over men by 7-9%, and this was consistent with 2008. However, the 56% of women that voted for Obama, compared to the 43% that voted for McCain indicates larger female support, of 13 percentage points, behind Obama, as opposed to the one percentage point Obama had over McCain among males (Roper Center 2008).

#### *Age*

Although it is accurate to say that as one ages, the more conservative one becomes, it is important to be reminded that this describes ideology, not partisanship or vote choice. In terms of partisanship evidence shows that as one gets older, the more attached she becomes to her political party (Campbell et al. 1960 and Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Attesting to this is the inverse relationship of those identifying themselves as Independents and age. Youngsters are more influenceable than their elders; their political preferences are shaped by their upbringing, with the heavy influence of their parents, and by important, historic events (e.g, the Vietnam War, civil rights movement, and the Great Depression) that defined their generation. With these two influences, individuals then form their political opinions at a young age. These opinions, however, are less stable, making younger voters more likely to change partisanship than older citizens. There is no evidence that alludes to the fact that the younger one is the more Democratic, in fact “the percentage of Republicans (strong and weak) from the youngest to the

oldest forms a flat line” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 148). Thus, there is no definitive evidence in the likelihood of favoring a particular party according to age, because it depends on one’s upbringing and generational events. However, because younger voters are less attached to a particular political party, they can be more easily persuaded or convinced by campaign information.

The voting preferences among youths and elders were consistent in 2008 with ideology, in that younger voters were more likely to support the liberal candidate than their older counterparts, as seen in Table 3.9. The research and exit polls divide age groups differently than the U.S. Census, but the age groups are similar in terms of one’s life cycle, with younger, middle, and older age groups. Obama received 66% of the votes from young people ages 18-29. This portion gradually decreased, with just 45% of those 65 and older voting for Obama. The eldest age group was the only that voted more Republican in 2008 than in 2004, preferring McCain to Obama by eight percentage points. However, those under the age of 65 favored Obama, with the greatest discrepancy among the youngest voters, favoring Obama by 34 percentage points. The Democratic favorability among Americans decreased with age, as did the gap between this favorability from 2004 to 2008, meaning that the Democratic shift since 2004 was greatest among younger voters and gradually declined with age. Aside from those over 65, 2008 showed strong Democratic preferences among a majority of Americans, especially among the youngest citizens, preferring Obama to McCain by 34 percentage points but also increasing Democratic support by 12.5 percentage points when compared to 2004 (Roper Center 2008).

#### *Race and Hispanic Origin*

The voting patterns of racial and ethnic groups in the United States typically are the most distinct. Whites, African Americans, and Hispanics are the most prominent racial groups in the United States today. Whites, while not always Republican, consistently tend to be the least Democratic of the three racial groups. African Americans have the most distinctive voting pattern than any other demographic. They, along with Hispanics, favor Democrats with overwhelming support. This significant support is attributed to the Democratic policies on civil rights, equality, and economic opportunity (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008).

Throughout the 1960s, the Democratic Party was favored on average by 24 percentage points across the U.S. Seventy two percent of African Americans from this decade were Democrat identifiers or leaners, whereas white Democrat identifiers or leaners accounted for just 18 percentage points in the 1960s, meaning that whites were 4 percentage points less supportive of Democrats, when compared to the national electorate. In the 1980s America as a whole favored Democrats by 13 percentage points. Democrats during this decade were favored by African Americans by 72 percentage points and by whites by just one percentage point. This indicates that whites were 12 points less Democratic than the rest of the American electorate. The steady shift away from Democrats among whites, turned into Republican support in 2000 and 2004. When the country favored Democrats by seven percentage points (and African Americans by 75 points) in 2000 and 2004, whites favored Republicans by seven percentage points. The growing support of Republicans by white Americans contrasts with the consistent Democratic favoritism from African Americans (Abramowitz and Saunders 2006).



Hispanic Americans, like African Americans, have been strong supporters of Democrats<sup>15</sup> because of their issue stances that support “civil rights, Spanish language programs in school, [and] immigrant services...[However,] recently there has been speculation that Latinos are shifting their political allegiance, perhaps because of greater integration into the larger American community” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 324-5). In the past decade, Republicans have made a larger effort to reach out to Hispanics in attempts to gain their support. In 2000, 35% Hispanics voted for the Republican candidate, George W. Bush. This was a 14 percentage points increase from 1996, when Republicans received just 21% of the Hispanic vote (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Although more Hispanics are voting for Republicans, this ethnic group still lends most of its support to the Democrats. Knowing the Democrats’ overwhelming African American favoritism, and the Republican support from whites helped Obama’s campaign tactics. By registering and mobilizing likely voters that typically would have been underrepresented on Election Day, their support for Obama and strength in the electorate was magnified.

In 2008, Democratic support increased among whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians. McCain won among whites, receiving 55% of their vote. However, the Republican support from whites in 2008 decreased by two percentage points when compared to 2004. Obama received overwhelming support, of 95%, from his fellow African Americans. Hispanics and Asians also favored Obama. Obama received 14 percentage points more than the Democratic candidate in 2004 among Hispanics with 67%. The greatest Democratic shift in 2008 was among Hispanics. Obama’s greatest support was among African Americans; however, Asians in 2008 showed a larger Democratic shift than African Americans with 62% voting for Obama, compared to the 56% that favored Kerry in 2004, as depicted in Table 3.10. Winning among

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<sup>15</sup> With the exception of Cuban Americans, who are more likely to favor Republicans than the rest of the Hispanic community in America

African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians in 2008 was quite a victory for Obama; however, despite losing the majority of white voters, a significant Democratic shift among all racial groups was apparent in 2008 that definitely assisted in Obama's success (Roper Center 2008).

### *Religion*

Religious groups share similar beliefs, ethical standards, and views of the world. As a result, they share many of the same political preferences also. The varying denominations of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism and level of religiosity complicate identifying trends among the three largest religions in America. However, there seem to be distinctive voting patterns of religious groups seen in any given election.

The more recent research of the correlation between religion and voting behavior has been ingrained in religiosity or frequency of worship attendance. It seems as though "frequent worship attenders would favor Republican presidential candidates because of their traditional attitudes, while the less observant would favor the Democrat candidate because of less traditional values" (Green 2010, 439). In 2004 the National Election Survey found that 65% of those that attend worship services more than one a week favored Bush, the Republican candidate, as opposed to the 37% of those that never attended worship (Green 2010).

Protestants make up the largest religious group in the United States. There are various denominations within Protestantism; these smaller religious sects tend to vote together. Protestantism is divided up into two major denominations: mainline and evangelical. Evangelicals tend to be more conservative than their mainline counterparts. "In the 1960 presidential contest, an estimated 60 percent of evangelicals voted Democratic, in contrast to only 40 percent in 1988...77.5 percent of evangelicals said they voted for Bush in contrast to

50.0 percent for mainline Protestants, 52.5 percent for White Catholics, and 26.7 percent for Jews” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 329) in 2004. Evidently, there is a consistent trend that indicates Protestants are more likely than Catholics and Jews to favor the Republican Party.

Catholics, traditionally, have been strong Democratic supporters. However, in the past quarter century, this support has steadily declined. “From 1952 to 2004, in the NES, Democratic Party identification among Catholics closely followed a downward linear trend, from about 70 percent to about 50 percent” (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008, 327). The tenure of President Kennedy, the first and only Catholic president, was responsible for some of the Democratic tendencies in the 1960s. However, the support of the Catholic Democratic presidential candidate, John Kerry, in 2004 did not reach the level of support JFK had received, which also indicates the declining Democratic support among Catholics.

Like Catholics, Americans that are unaffiliated with any religious institution tend to prefer Democratic policies and candidates. In the presidential elections between 1992 and 2004, unaffiliated citizens were, on average, 10% more likely to favor Democrats, peaking in 2004 with Republicans lacking 18% of the unaffiliated vote, when compared to Democrats (Smidt et al. 2010).

Jewish Americans have voted predominantly Democratic in presidential elections. In the presidential elections of 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004, 45% 51%, 57%, and 64%, of Jews, respectively identified themselves as Democrats, an average of 54.25% (Smidt et al. 2010). This number shows significant support of the Democrats, and sharply contrasts with the portion of Jews identifying themselves as Republican. In the same four elections, the average of Jews that

identified themselves as Republicans was just 23.25%,<sup>16</sup> which is less than half of the Democratic support among Jews. Although the Jewish population in the U.S. is marginal, their impressive voting rates and consistent voting trends continually fares well for Democrats.

Consistent with historical voting trends, Protestants in 2008 were the only religious group that favored McCain in the presidential contest. Although only 45% of Protestants voted for Obama in 2008, they favored Obama by five percentage points more than the 2004 Democratic candidate, John Kerry. Obama won the majority (54%) of Catholic voters, this margin was quite small compared to the Democratic preference in 2008 among Jews, other faiths, and those unaffiliated with a religious institution. Among all the religious groups Obama's support peaked among Jews with 78%, as seen in Table 3.11. Americans practicing other faiths (besides Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism) were the only to decrease their Democratic support in 2008, when compared to 2004. However, this decrease was just by one percentage point, which still designated an overwhelming 73% of the votes among other faiths to Obama (Sabato 2010).

### *Region of Residence*

With the implementation of the Electoral College system in the United States, campaigning is concentrated on states that do not have traditional or distinct voting trends. However, in any given state, inherently there are individuals with contrasting political preferences. These differing ideologies have trends within states based on the population density and distance to a major metropolitan American city. The five categories that define the social-geographical landscape of the United States are: core, inner suburb, mature suburb, emerging suburb, and exurb (rural). These categories decrease in population density respectively, as does

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<sup>16</sup> The break down of Republican identifiers in 1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004 was 18%, 29%, 24%, and 22%, respectively.

the area's likeliness to favor Democrats. In the past three presidential elections core areas, or cities, favored Democrats by 36.5%, compared to Americans that reside in exurbs, or rural areas (Lang, Sanchez, and Berube 2008).<sup>17</sup> However, the metropolitan and urban areas of a particular state define its political tendencies on an aggregate level.

There are certain states that have such distinctive voting tendencies, campaigns neglect them because their support is assumed to favor a particular party. North Carolina, Tennessee, Louisiana, Georgia, South Carolina, Mississippi, Kentucky, Montana, South Dakota, Texas, Kansas, Alabama, Alaska, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah are known to vote Republican, and thus have earned the title of a 'red state.' California, Connecticut, Illinois, New York, Maryland, Vermont, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and the District of Columbia historically have been 'blue states,' favoring Democrats by a large margin (Frey 2008). The remaining states have a smaller disparity regarding partisanship. They are New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Colorado, Florida, Washington, Delaware, Virginia, Arizona, Wisconsin, Iowa, New Hampshire, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, Missouri, Hawaii, Maine, and Arkansas. In the 2004 presidential elections, these states favored a particular candidate by less than ten percentage points. However, it seems as though the reasons why a particular state votes a certain way has to do with the characteristics of the state's population, which have been investigated and described throughout this chapter.

States are the focus of presidential campaigns because of the nature of the Electoral College. When looking at the electoral map of the United States there are significant changes in vote choice. Although Obama won just 28 states, he "won nine states captured by George W. Bush in 2004: Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio,

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<sup>17</sup> With urban cores preferring Democrats by an average of 73.8% and exurbs by 37.35%.

and Virginia... [and] kept every single one of the nineteen states won by John Kerry in 2004” (Sabato 2010, 33). The 2008 election marked the first time North Carolina had voted Democratic in a presidential election since 1976. Obama’s victories in Indiana and Virginia were even more groundbreaking, being that they hadn’t favored a Democratic presidential candidate since Lyndon Johnson in 1964 (Sabato 2010). Although the voting rate was low, Obama received the largest portion of the vote in Hawaii with 73%. The smallest portion came from Wyoming with just 33.4%. Democrats gained support since 2004 in every state besides West Virginia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Louisiana, as detailed in Table 3.12. This overwhelming growth in Democratic support in 45 of the 50 states indicated the political sentiment across the national during the 2008 election.

### *Income*

Although there is no formal identification to a social class, America is made up mostly of those from the working or middle class. Typically, those with lower incomes prefer Democratic policies because they offer more opportunities for families with lower incomes. However, the degree of Democratic support among the working class varies, as exhibited in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. In the 2000 election, 59% of Americans that considered themselves as working class voted for Al Gore, the Democratic presidential candidate. In the following election 60.6% of the working class favored the Democrat, John Kerry (Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). The advantage Democrats have in the working class, of about ten percentage points has been consistent in most elections in the past quarter century. This favorability of the larger working class towards the Democrats, however, can be easily changed dependent on the class polarization of the United States in any given election year.

With working class Americans favoring and benefiting from Democratic policies, it is no wonder why “Obama won a massive 73 percent among those who make less than \$15,000 a year in income, 60 percent among those with incomes between \$15,000-30,000, and 55 percent of those making \$30,000-50,000” (Sabato 2010, 46).<sup>18</sup> Obama carried more votes in every income bracket besides those with an income between \$50,000 and \$74,999, in which McCain bested Obama by just one percentage point, and tied with receiving 49% each among those making more than \$100,000 a year. There was a steady trend that indicated decreasing Democratic support as income ascended. However, there was a shift towards Democrats in 2008 among all income levels. Ironically, this shift from 2004 was most significant in the lowest and the highest income brackets, as seen in Table 3.13 (Roper Center 2008).

### *Education*

After World War II and the GI bill many more Americans received college degrees. Today, more than half of Americans have attended college and the dropout rate among high school students has decreased. There are clear and consistent turnout trends by educational status, however, the trends of voting behavior according to educational attainment have become less distinctive. The “56-percentage-point difference in the proportions of high and low education groups voting Democratic in 1980 had dwindled to a 28-point difference – a 50 percent drop – by 1992” (Miller and Shanks 1996, 273). It seems as though the more education

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<sup>18</sup> The income brackets are different than those in the first section of the paper that indicated voting rates and turnout. This is because the Roper Center categorizes income by different intervals. However, to maintain consistency of the actual way citizens, of all different demographics voted in 2008, I continued to use data from the Roper Center in the vote breakdown by income in 2008.

one receives the more likely one is to favor Republican initiatives. However, those at the top of educational attainment with advanced degrees tend to favor Democrats.

Americans that did not graduate high school favored Democrats on average by 36.25 percentage points in the 1980, 1984, 1988, and 1992 elections. Those that did graduate high school favored Democrats by 12.75 points in the same time period; and individuals that attended some college favored Republicans by 5.5 percentage points (Miller and Shanks 1996). However, the disparity of vote choice according to educational attainment has been decreasing since the 1980s. Like income, there are many other characteristics of individuals that pursue higher education that are more likely to indicate their partisanship or shape their political preferences.

In 2008 there was a relationship with one's educational attainment and Democratic favorability. As Table 3.14 displays, the less education the one has the more likely one was to vote for Obama in 2008, with the exception of those with advanced degrees. Obama carried more votes than McCain in each of the education levels, having the smallest margin by just two percentage points with Americans that received a bachelor's degree. Like income, those with the lowest and highest educational attainment showed the most support for Obama on Election Day, receiving 63% of the votes among those that did not graduate high school, and 58% of the votes among those that have advanced degrees. Although a Democratic shift was apparent among all education levels it was the most significant among those with the least attainment, once again supporting the inverse relationship of education level and Democratic support (Sabato 2010).

### Conclusions

The election of Barack Obama was a result of many factors. A Democratic shift was experienced across the United States in 2008. Of all the social groups studied in this chapter,



only voters over the age of 65, voters that practiced other faiths besides Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism, and voters in Louisiana, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and West Virginia favored the Democrats less in 2008 than in 2004. Every other demographic group saw an increase in Democratic support when compared to 2004. This national trend captured the American sentiment in 2008.

The increase in the voting rates among social groups that typically vote Democratic such as African Americans, Hispanics, 18-29 year olds, and working class citizens, as expected fared well with Democrats, giving these social groups more weight than usual in the 2008 election. The decrease in turnout among whites, males, and those making \$75,000-99,999 a year, also aided in the success of Barack Obama, being that these groups typically vote Republican.

The exact cause for this increase in voting rates among certain demographics and the Democratic shift in an overwhelming majority of the United States could have been a result of successful campaigning and GOTV efforts, the political and economic climate of the U.S. during the election, or the disapproval of the Republican led Congress and Bush administration. The next chapter of this thesis aims to find the source of America's Democratic shift in 2008 that resulted in the victory of Barack Obama.

Table 3.1  
Rates of Voting by Gender  
(Number in thousands)

Gender	Citizen Population	% of Citizen Population	Voted	% of 2008 Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout From 04-08
Male	98,818	48.0	60,729	46.3	61.5%	62.1%	-0.6
Female	107,255	52.0	70,415	53.7	65.7%	65.4%	+0.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.2  
Rates of Voting by Age  
(Number in thousands)

Age	Citizen Population	% of Citizen Population	Voted	% of 2008 Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout from 04-08
18-29	43,844	21.3	22,388	17.1	51.1%	42.8%	+8.3
30-44	52,563	25.5	32,497	24.8	61.8%	54.6%	+7.2
45-59	58,609	28.4	40,124	30.5	68.5%	65.9%	+2.6
60+	51,058	24.8	36,139	27.6	70.8%	69.1%	+1.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.3  
Rates of Voting by Race  
(Number in thousands)

Race	Citizen Population	% of Citizen Population	Voted	% of 2008 Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout from 04-08
White	169,438	82.2	109,100	83.2	64.4%	65.4%	-1.0
African American	24,930	12.1	16,133	12.3	64.7%	60.0%	+4.7
Hispanic	19,537	9.5	9,745	7.4	49.9%	47.2%	+2.7

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.4  
Rate of Voting by Religion

Religion	% of Population	% of Electorate	2008 Turnout (averaged)
Protestants & Other Christians	54.9	54	63%
Catholics	22.5	27	63.5%
Jews	1.2	2	88%
Other Faith	4.8	6	60%
Unaffiliated	16.7	12	54%

Source: Henry Institute. National Survey on Religion and Public Life. 2008. *Religious Voters in the 2008 Election*.

Table 3.5  
Rate of Voting by State  
(Number in thousands)

State	Citizen Population	% of Citizen Population	Voted	% of Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout from 04-08
Alabama	2,126	1.0	1,327	.9	62.4%	63.2%	-.8
Alaska	468	.2	304	.2	65.0%	67.6%	-2.6
Arizona	4,169	2.0	2,497	1.7	59.9%	63.8%	-3.9
Arkansas	2,030	1.0	1,092	.8	53.8%	58.7%	-4.9
California	21,811	10.5	13,828	10.3	63.4%	61.9%	+1.5
Colorado	3,374	1.6	2,308	1.6	68.4%	67.5%	+0.9
Connecticut	2,396	1.2	1,610	1.1	67.2%	63.2%	+4
Delaware	606	.3	408	.3	67.3%	66.4%	+0.9
District of Columbia	412	.2	306	.2	74.1%	69.2%	+4.9
Florida	12,462	6.0	7,951	6.1	63.8%	64.3%	-0.5
Georgia	6,515	3.2	4,183	3.2	64.2%	56.8%	+7.4
Hawaii	882	.4	457	.2	51.8%	50.8%	+1
Idaho	986	.5	644	.4	61.4%	50.8%	+10.6
Illinois	8,684	4.2	5,436	4.1	62.6%	65.6%	-3
Indiana	4,559	2.2	2,758	2.1	60.5%	58.6%	+1.9
Iowa	2,138	1.0	1,501	1.0	70.2%	71.3%	-1.1
Kansas	1,926	.9	1,219	.9	63.3%	64.2%	-0.9
Kentucky	3,094	1.5	1,952	1.5	63.1%	65.0%	-1.9
Louisiana	3,056	1.5	2,149	1.5	70.3%	64.2%	+6.1
Maine	1,006	.5	716	.4	71.2%	73.1%	-1.9
Maryland	3,823	1.9	2,611	2.0	68.3%	65.6%	+2.7
Massachusetts	4,537	2.2	3,044	2.3	67.1%	68.6%	-1.5

Michigan	7,176	3.4	4,865	3.6	67.8	67.1%	+0.7
Minnesota	3,679	1.8	2,759	2.1	75.0%	79.2%	-4.2
Mississippi	2,064	1.0	1,439	1.1	69.7%	61.7%	+8
Missouri	4,325	2.1	2,846	2.1	65.8%	68.5%	-2.7
Montana	723	.3	473	.4	65.4%	70.2%	-4.8
Nebraska	1,254	.6	844	.6	67.3%	65.3%	+2
Nevada	1,715	.8	1,027	.8	59.9%	58.9%	+1
New Hampshire	986	.5	708	.5	71.2%	71.5%	-0.3
New Jersey	5,674	2.7	3,637	2.6	64.1%	66.0%	-1.9
New Mexico	1,351	.7	846	.6	62.6%	64.4%	-1.8
New York	12,855	6.2	7,559	5.7	58.8%	60.2%	-1.4
North Carolina	6,269	3.0	4,370	3.2	67.5%	61.4%	+6.1
North Dakota	476	.2	321	.2	67.5%	71.5%	-4
Ohio	8,371	4.1	5,483	4.1	65.5%	66.1%	-0.6
Oklahoma	2,567	1.2	1,507	1.1	58.7%	62.3%	-3.6
Oregon	2,689	1.3	1,818	1.3	67.6%	74.0%	-6.4
Pennsylvania	9,210	4.5	5,747	4.3	62.4%	64.5%	-2.1
Rhode Island	752	.4	507	.3	67.4%	63.7%	+3.7
South Carolina	3,201	1.6	2,100	1.5	65.6%	63.2%	+2.4
South Dakota	575	.3	390	.2	67.8%	68.3%	-0.5
Tennessee	4,533	2.2	2,516	1.8	55.5%	54.6%	+0.9
Texas	15,036	7.3	8,435	6.3	56.1%	57.1%	-1
Utah	1,768	.9	939	.7	53.1%	67.8%	-14.7
Vermont	476	.2	308	.2	64.7%	67.3%	-2.6
Virginia	5,312	2.6	3,650	2.7	68.7%	63.1%	+5.6
Washington	4,600	2.2	3,073	2.3	66.8%	67.6%	-0.8
West Virginia	1,388	.7	741	.6	53.4%	57.2%	-3.8
Wisconsin	4,055	2.0	2,887	2.2	71.2%	76.6%	-5.4
Wyoming	389	.2	250	.2	64.3%	66.9%	-2.6

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.6  
Rates of Voting by Income  
(Number in thousands)

Income	Reported Citizen Population	% of Family Population	Voted	% of 2008 Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout From 04-08
<\$20,000	12,837	8.4	6,665	6.9	51.9%	48.3%	+3.6
\$20,000- 29,999	11,725	7.7	6,606	6.8	56.3%	58.4%	-2.1
\$30,000- 39,999	14,144	9.2	8,793	9.1	62.2%	62.1%	+0.1
\$40,000- 49,999	11,295	7.4	7,307	7.6	64.7%	68.5%	-3.8
\$50,000- 74,999	27,850	18.2	19,743	20.4	73.5%	72.2%	+1.3
\$75,000- 99,999	18,114	11.8	13,846	14.3	76.4%	77.9%	-1.5
<\$100,00	45,964	30.0	33,589	34.8	73.1%	81.3%	-8.2

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.7  
Rates of Voting by Educational Attainment  
(Number in thousands)

Education Level	Citizen Population	% of Citizen Population	Voted	% of 2008 Electorate	2008 Turnout	2004 Turnout	Change in Turnout From 04-08
< High School Graduate	22,981	11.2	9,046	6.9	39.4%	39.5%	-.01
High School Graduate/GED	65,378	31.7	35,866	27.3	54.9%	56.4%	-1.5
Some College or Associate's Degree	60,974	29.6	41,477	31.6	68.0%	68.9%	-.09
Bachelor's Degree	38,091	18.5	29,330	22.4	77.0%	77.5%	-.05
Advanced Degree	18,648	9.0	15,425	11.8	82.7%	84.2%	-1.5

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Report. *Voting and Registration in the Election of November of 2004 and 2008.*

Table 3.8  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Gender

Gender	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
Male	44	49	+5
Female	51	56	+5
Gender Gap (M minus F)	7	7	

Source: Roper Center. Presidential Elections. *How Groups Voted in 2004 and 2008*.

Table 3.9  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Age Group

Age	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
18-29	53.5	66	+12.5
30-49	46	52	+6
50-64	47	50	+3
65+	47	45	-2

Source: Roper Center. Presidential Elections. *How Groups Voted in 2004 and 2008*.

Table 3.10  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Racial Group

Race	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
White	41	43	+2
African American	88	95	+7
Hispanic	53	67	+14
Asian	56	62	+8

Source: Roper Center. Presidential Elections. *How Groups Voted in 2004 and 2008*.

Table 3.11  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Religious Group

Religion	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
Protestants & Other Christians	40	45	+5
Catholics	47	54	+7
Jews	74	78	+4
Other	74	73	-1
Unaffiliated	67	75	+8

Source: Sabato, Larry J. *U.S. Presidential Election Results – National Exit Poll*

Table 3.12  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by State

State	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
Alabama	37.1	39.1	2.0
Alaska	36.8	38.9	2.2
Arizona	44.7	45.7	1.0
Arkansas	45.0	39.8	-5.2
California	55.0	62.3	7.2
Colorado	47.6	54.6	6.9
Connecticut	55.3	61.4	6.1
Delaware	53.8	62.6	8.8
District of Columbia	90.5	93.4	2.9
Florida	47.5	51.4	3.9
Georgia	41.6	47.4	5.7
Hawaii	54.4	73.0	18.6
Idaho	30.7	37.0	6.3
Illinois	55.2	62.7	7.5
Indiana	39.6	50.5	10.9
Iowa	49.7	54.8	5.2
Kansas	37.1	42.4	5.3
Kentucky	40.0	41.8	1.8
Louisiana	42.7	40.5	-2.1
Maine	54.6	58.8	4.2
Maryland	56.6	62.9	6.4
Massachusetts	62.7	63.2	0.5
Michigan	51.7	58.4	6.6
Minnesota	51.8	55.2	3.5
Mississippi	40.5	43.4	2.9

Missouri	46.4	49.9	3.6
Montana	39.5	48.8	9.3
Nebraska	33.2	42.4	9.2
Nevada	48.7	56.4	7.7
New Hampshire	50.7	54.9	4.2
New Jersey	53.4	57.9	4.5
New Mexico	49.6	57.7	8.1
New York	59.3	63.5	4.2
North Carolina	43.8	50.2	6.4
North Dakota	36.1	45.6	9.5
Ohio	48.9	52.3	3.4
Oklahoma	34.4	34.4	-0.1
Oregon	52.1	58.4	6.3
Pennsylvania	51.3	55.3	4.0
Rhode Island	60.6	64.2	3.6
South Carolina	41.4	45.5	4.1
South Dakota	39.1	45.7	6.6
Tennessee	42.8	42.4	-0.4
Texas	38.5	44.1	5.6
Utah	26.7	35.5	8.8
Vermont	60.3	68.9	8.6
Virginia	45.9	53.2	7.3
Washington	53.6	58.8	5.1
West Virginia	43.5	43.3	-0.2
Wisconsin	50.2	57.1	6.9
Wyoming	29.7	33.4	3.8

Source: Sabato, Larry J. *U.S. Presidential Election Results – National Exit Poll*

Table 3.13  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Income

Income	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
<\$15,000	63	73	+10
\$15,000-29,999	57	60	+3
\$30,000-49,999	50	55	+5
\$50,000-74,999	43	48	+5
\$75,000-99,999	45	51	+6
<\$100,000	41	49	+8

Source: Roper Center. Presidential Elections. *How Groups Voted in 2004 and 2008*.



Table 3.14  
Percentage that Voted Democratic by Educational Attainment

Education Level	2004	2008	Change from 04-08
< High School Graduate	50	63	+13
High School Graduate/GED	47	52	+5
Some College or Associate's Degree	46	51	+5
Bachelor' Degree	46	50	+4
Advanced Degree	55	58	+3

Source: Sabato, Larry J. *U.S. Presidential Election Results – National Exit Poll*

CHAPTER FOUR:  
CONTEXT OR CAMPAIGN?  
IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEMOCRATIC SHIFT OF 2008

In 2008 there was an increase in Democratic votes, when compared to 2004. This Democratic shift could have been the result of many factors. However, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, Barack Obama's campaign played the largest role. Endorsers of the limited effects theory, like Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, and McPhee, would protest this claim, believing that campaigns have minimal effects on voters because of predispositions. But the Democratic shift, experienced throughout almost every demographic in the U.S., attests to theories that indicate individuals are more influenceable than these experts had originally assumed.

Voters that departed from their preexisting political preferences and voted for Obama were fundamental to his victory. Previous limited effects research, as described in Chapter 1, interviewed the same voters throughout the course of a campaign to find the true effects of campaigning. This research defined converters as those who, in the same election year, had changed their vote choice after campaigning began. I lack the capital, manpower, and time to conduct interviews with thousands of Americans before, during, and after the 2008 presidential campaigns. Therefore, this research will instead compare the existing election data of 2004 and 2008 to help identify voters that cast ballots which contradicted their previous political preferences.

Change

Throughout the course of the 2008 campaign season there were Americans that were undecided about their vote choice. There was some fluctuation in public opinion polls that

indicates this indecision. In June and August Obama had an 11-percentage point lead over McCain. This advantage shrunk to just three points in early September and shortly [thereafter](#) rose again. Some Americans were unsure of their vote choice until Election Day and some had switched away from their initial or intended vote choice. The actual results of the election, as described in the previous chapter, demonstrate [a large](#) Democratic shift in 2008 and thus, change [for many voters](#).

The existing literature, from scholars like Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Gaudet, was able to identify converters, those that had switched their vote choice during the campaign season. This [thesis research](#) cannot identify converters [in 2008](#) because of its limitations as previously mentioned. However, from the data and research available, this paper can identify change in 2008. Change, for the purpose of this paper is seen in those that are identified Republicans or those that voted for the Republican George W. Bush in 2004 and then cast a ballot for Democrat Barack Obama in 2008. I cannot explicitly identify all those that voted for Bush in 2004 and Obama in 2008 as converters because it assumes that voters in 2004 voted similarly to how they have in previous elections. This completely neglects the possibility that individuals in 2004 could have voted in a manner that opposes [their](#) previous predispositions and voting behavior. But the comparison of voting patterns in 2004 to 2008 provides significant evidence that change occurred in 2008, as evidenced from the Democratic shift. This chapter seeks to identify change and the reasons that caused it.

#### *Evidence of Change: Fluctuation in Public Opinion*

The fluctuation of public opinion polls during the 2008 presidential election signifies the changes of vote intention among the electorate. Once the candidates were announced, Obama

instantly had a lead over McCain. In June and August, Obama had an 11-point advantage over McCain among registered voters. By early September, when most Americans begin to truly evaluate the candidates and direct attention to the election, Obama was ahead in the polls by only three percentage points. After mid-September, when the financial crisis triggered government intervention, Obama's favorability grew quickly. Gallup's (2008) polls show that by October Obama had a seven-point lead over McCain. And just before Election Day, Obama was ahead by 15 percentage points.

Although the polls indicate that Obama had an advantage over McCain throughout the campaign season, his lead was unstable until mid-September. This suggests that voters were still unsure of their vote choice and therefore, did not have a predetermined favorite. Thus, by Election Day, they were influenced by a plethora of external factors, like the economy, approval of President Bush and by the strategic campaigns of Barack Obama and John McCain.

#### *Evidence of Change: Partisanship*

As Chapter 1 mentions, partisanship consistently is a great indicator of vote choice. The election of 2008 was no different. The American National Election Study (ANES) is an organization that surveys voters before and after elections. Of the voters contacted by the ANES, 91.6% of those that identified themselves as Democrats voted for Obama. Similarly, 92.6% of self-identifying Republicans voted for McCain. These high rates of support show the strength of partisanship. Contrary to what one would have expected given the large Democratic shift in the U.S., there was a larger percentage of voters that stepped outside their party to vote for McCain. However, this difference was just one percentage point and indicates a solid base of support from

each of the candidate's respective political party and about the same rate of support from the opposing party.

McCain just slightly fared better than Obama among voters within their respective political parties *and* among voters that stepped outside their party. However, this support was not as large as Obama's support among Democrats in the overall election. Just 27% of Americans identified themselves as Republicans in 2008, down six percentage-points since 2004. Thirty six percent of Americans identified themselves as Democrats in 2008 (Pew Research Center 2008). This means that only four million Republicans voted for Obama as opposed to the six million Democrats that voted for McCain (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). It also indicates that about 68 million Democrats voted for Obama, whereas just 51.5 million Republicans voted for McCain (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Therefore, although, McCain's favorability among Republicans was important in the election, it was not as strong as Obama's success among Democrats since Democrats had a larger base by about 10 percentage points.

Among Independents, however, Obama fared much better than McCain. More than 58% of Independents voted for Obama, compared to the 41.7% of Independents that voted for McCain. Since 37% of Americans claimed no party affiliation in 2008, the 16.6 percentage point margin among Independents that Obama had over McCain had an even larger effect in the election (Pew Research Center 2008). With about the same rate of support from their respective parties and from individuals that voted outside their party, it is evident that it was the Independents' support for Obama that had the largest effect in the election. This might have been the result of Obama's campaign efforts that reached out to voters outside the Democratic base, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

### *Evidence of Change: Bush Voters*

The individuals that voted for the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, for president in 2004 and then for Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, in 2008 clearly had a change in political preferences. These two candidates were different not only in their partisanship. Bush and Obama embodied completely different policies and characters. The two both eventually became America's president but had distinct goals for their leadership. While the ANES cannot identify which exact reasons propelled voters to switch votes for a particular party, it certainly leaves open the possibility that campaigns were, in fact, a reason behind why so many Americans had voted for the Republican George W. Bush and then the Democrat Barack Obama.

Obama maintained 91.6% of the Kerry voters from 2004 and McCain maintained just 83.3% of those that voted for George W. Bush. Obama attracted a significant amount of support from those voted for the opposing party in the previous election, receiving 16.7% of votes from those that cast ballots for Bush in 2004. Only 8.4% of Kerry supporters voted for McCain (ANES 2008). Of the voters that switched between parties between 2004 and 2008, two-thirds favored Barack Obama in 2008.

### *Reasons for Change: President Bush*

The evaluation of a current president has a substantial effect on an election that seeks to elect a new president. Evaluations of presidents are assessed by the economy, foreign and domestic affairs, honesty, integrity, personal style and communication skills (Abramowitz 2008). President George W. Bush's approval rating peaked after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 with 90%. But, by the latter half of his second term, in the midst of the 2008 campaigning season, the evaluations of President Bush were quite dismal, reaching a low of 25% just before

the election (Gallup 2008). With the financial crisis, recession, and increasing unemployment rates, the economy caused many Americans to face difficult hardships. The seemingly failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were extremely unpopular, costing the U.S. trillions of dollars and thousands of lives. Bush's performance in domestic affairs, such as his response to Hurricane Katrina and No Child Left Behind Act, were highly criticized. The torture ordered by United States military personnel on prisoners in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib jeopardized the trust and integrity of President Bush and the government. And his abundance of vacation days in Texas led many Americans to disapprove of Bush's lackadaisical attitude. Failing in almost every criteria of presidential evaluations, the evaluations of President Bush going into the 2008 election were unimpressive.

The unpopularity of President Bush didn't bode well for the Republicans. His attachment to the party had tainted Americans' impression of Republican policies. In forecasting the 2008 presidential election Abramowitz (2008, 695) found in previous contests "a candidate from the president's party running in a second- or later-term election suffers a penalty of more than 4 percentage points compared with a candidate running in a first-term election." The two consecutive terms of Republican leadership exacerbated the Republicans' and McCain's unfavorable political environment; Americans were eager for change. This may suggest that *any* Democratic candidate would have won given the favorable political environment. However, Obama used the context of the election to his advantage in his campaigning tactics, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Election results from 1948 to 2004, determined that "for every 1 percentage point increase in the president's net approval rating, the candidate of the president's party can expect an increase of just over 0.1% of the major-party vote" (Abramowitz 2008, 694). With 31% of

Americans approving of President Bush and 61% disapproving, his net approval rating was -30% in July 2008 (Gallup 2008). As estimated by Abramowitz (2008), this would have affected McCain's vote by -3%. However, the poll taken closest to Election Day on November 2 indicated that just 25% of Americans approved of President Bush (Gallup 2008). This meant his net approval rating was -38%, which would have left McCain with a disadvantage of almost four percentage points. The popular vote designated 52.9% to Obama and 45.6% to McCain (Cho and Gimpel 2009). Without this disadvantage of 3.8%, according to this forecasting model, McCain would have received 49.4% of the popular vote. This would have changed the outcome of the election. With all the factors that affect vote choice – approval ratings of President Bush, the state of the economy, and Obama's strong campaigning efforts – the aggregate effect of each of these factors, predicted that Obama would have won by a landslide. However, the election was closer than what forecasters had predicted. Scholars believe this was a result of racist sentiments. If racism weren't an issue in the election, McCain's 3.8% disadvantage would not have changed the outcome of the election because Obama's margin of victory would have been much greater. This topic will be discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

The American National Election Study (2008) indicates that 73.8% of voters that disapproved of President Bush at the time of the election voted for Obama, whereas only 26.2% voted for McCain. Of those that approved of President Bush, 88.3% voted for McCain and 11.7% for Obama; however, these numbers are strikingly lower being that very few Americans approved of Bush in 2008. Among the many Americans disapproving of President Bush, Obama fared better, by more than 47 percentage points. Being a Democrat, Obama was distinguishable from the Republican Party. McCain, being a Senator for over 20 years, was already well established in the eyes of Americans as a Republican, the same party of President Bush. This



explains why 66% of Americans were very or somewhat concerned that McCain's policies would be too similar to those that President Bush pursued (Gallup 2008).

This is a result from the nature of America's two-party system, and less from campaigning. With this system, if one party is viewed negatively, the other typically receives more support by default, as demonstrated in 2008. If the evaluations of President Bush were more impressive, Americans would not have been searching for as much change in their next leader. And McCain's Republicanism would have, assumedly, benefited him in the election. Both campaigns, however, made strong efforts to separate and distinguish themselves from President Bush. Notably, Bush and Cheney never formally endorsed, traveled with, or rallied for the McCain-Palin ticket. Obama ran numerous television advertisements that not only separated himself from Bush and the Republicans but that also highlighted connections and similarities between George W. Bush and John McCain. Obama used McCain's voting record in which McCain admitted "I voted with the president over 90 percent of the time" in 2003 to draw these similarities (Tesler and Sears 2010, 52). By 2008, however, this number jumped to 95%.

"This effort to link McCain to Bush was particularly targeted towards, and fortunately for Obama, especially effective among Democrats who strongly disapproved of Bush's job performance...Obama increased his vote share from March to October by 13 points with those who most disapproved of Bush" (Tesler and Sears 2010, 69). With the evidence from the ANES and Abramowitz's (2008) formal predictions, it is clear that the evaluations of President Bush and his eight year tenure affected vote choice among Americans. The ANES data, which shows that Obama was had more support among voters that disapproved of President Bush, proves that Obama had an advantage over McCain, being able to separate himself from the Bush administration.

### *Reasons for Change: The Economy*

By Election Day 2008, the economy had become the most important issue. With 6.5% of the workforce jobless, the unemployment rate became the top priority to 43% of Americans (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2009; United States Department of Labor 2008). Although the real GDP grew 3.3% in the second quarter of 2008, disposable incomes were minimal, meaning the Americans were spending most of their money on bills, mortgages, and debt (Abramowitz 2008). At this time it was hard to imagine a more challenging economic environment.

The economy, however, managed to get worse. By mid-September the housing crisis finally caused an economic meltdown on Wall Street, which led Congress to approve a \$700 billion bailout plan. Throughout most of the campaign season, public opinion polls showed that support for Obama and McCain was almost the same, projecting a close election. Nevertheless, this changed once the financial crisis hit a catastrophic level in mid-September. “As perceptions of the economy sank, so did McCain’s fortunes in the polls” (Erikson 2009, 467). “On average, those who believed the economy was performing poorly at the outset of the campaign were likely to have higher levels of favorability towards candidate Obama and they grew more favorable towards the Democratic candidate as the year wore on. [Therefore,] the economy propelled his candidacy and secured voters beyond those in his initial base” (Scotto et al. 2010, 16).

Facing financial hardships, 95% of Americans thought the economy was extremely or very important in the weeks leading up to the election. Forty two percent thought the economy was the most important issue in the election. The next most important issue was the war in Iraq with 13% claiming it was their primary concern (Gallup 2008). It became apparent that voters

were becoming less concerned about issues other than the economy (Scotto et al. 2010). An October poll indicated that 63% of Americans were *not* confident that, if elected, McCain could fix the economy, whereas 31% were confident. Forty four percent of Americans were confident in Obama's economic policies and half (50%) were *not* (Gallup 2008). More Americans were confident in Obama than McCain. However, for the most part more Americans were unconfident rather than confident in the economic plans of the two candidates. This attests to the grim economic conditions that left most Americans uncertain about their potential leaders. The growing financial instability shifted the focus of many voters in 2008 to the economy; and the confidence Americans had in Obama over McCain in this issue solidified Obama's support as it became more salient.

Obama's favorability among those worrisome about the economy became visible in the election. In counties with high foreclosure rates it was determined that with every increase of one standard deviation of foreclosures, the Democratic share of the vote increased by 1.26-9.2% (Cho and Gimpel 2009). Although there were significant rates of foreclosures in western states, most of these individuals strongly identify as Republicans and their economic hardships would have not propelled them enough to vote for Obama, a Democrat.

Unemployment also seemed to have an effect on vote choice. Throughout the U.S. "each percentage point increase in the local unemployment rate was associated with a 0.6-point increase in the Democratic vote share over the 2004 baseline" (Masket 2009, 1032). Yet, another source estimates that the Democratic share of the vote only increased .04-.35% for each percent the unemployment rose. There was also evidence in some regions that increased joblessness was correlated with an increase in the Republican vote share; affecting the vote for McCain by only .05-.17% for each percent increase in unemployment (Cho and Gimpel 2009). However, these

figures, showing the effects of unemployment on vote choice for both Republicans and Democrats are so slight, they are, by and large, insignificant.

With Americans considering the economy the most important issue in the 2008 presidential election it is no wonder that it had an effect on vote choice. The financial crisis proved to be a ‘blessing in disguise’ for Obama. As an individual’s perception of the economy decreased, he became more likely to favor Obama. Of those very concerned, 60% voted for Obama. Of the 10% that were not too worried about the economy, 69% voted for McCain (ABC News 2008). Thus, the growing worry about the economy benefited Obama in helping him secure more votes.

#### *Reasons for Conversion: Campaigns*

The economy and evaluation of President Bush undoubtedly had an effect on the outcome of the 2008 presidential election. However, it was the campaigns of Barack Obama and John McCain that had the most effect on voters. Given the unfortunate context of the election, a time when the U.S. was experiencing an economic recession, involved in two wars, and had low approval ratings for its leaders, the state of America was daunting. The result of these conditions affected voters; nevertheless, the Obama’s campaign used these events to its advantage. The Democratic shift in America indicated that voters were changing their political preferences. These changes were seen in individuals that voted outside their previous political party or that had changed vote choice between the political parties since 2004. Although the economy and evaluations of George W. Bush affected this shift, evidence, as stated in this chapter and in Chapter 1, alludes to the persuasion and effectiveness of campaigns. McCain and Obama’s campaigns each used a plethora of venues to contact, inform, and convince voters. Their policies

as described during speeches and the debates, television advertisements, and contact with voters all assisted in their persuasion efforts. The campaigns proved to influence voters, however, Obama's proved to be more successful.

### *Policy*

The policies of Obama and McCain were ingrained in their speeches made on the campaign trail, at the nomination conventions, debates, or rallies. These differences in their policies are important factors that influence how Americans make their vote decision. With a larger Democratic base, Obama was handed an advantage since these individuals were already in accord with his platform. In 2008, the desire for change was the most important and most common reason that propelled vote choice (Gallup 2008). Agreeing with the views and values of the candidates, believing the candidate was experienced and qualified, and support for his economic plan were the remaining top reasons, respectively, that influenced vote choice (Gallup 2008). With the exception of experience and qualification, these factors were all relevant to the policies and solutions of the candidates.

The most important issues to Americans in 2008 were the economy, the situation in Iraq, energy (including gas prices), healthcare, terrorism, illegal immigration, abortion, and education, in order. In five of these eight topics, voters felt that Obama would have a better handle on these issues. Terrorism, the situation in Iraq, and illegal immigration were the only issues in which Americans felt more confident with McCain (Gallup 2008). This is no surprise being that McCain consistently discussed his expertise in foreign affairs, defense, and initiatives against illegal immigration throughout his campaign, most notably during the Republican Nomination Convention in August and the presidential debates.

Obama consistently spoke about his plans for the United States, mentioning the declining standards of education, the economy, the difficulty in finding quality healthcare, the burdening prices of gas, and quest for alternative fuel sources. All of these topics were also discussed in the three presidential debates. However, the economy was discussed most frequently, reflecting the primary concern of Americans. With over 50 million Americans watching, the presidential debates gave the candidates the biggest opportunity to attract voters. “Both men seemed well versed in economic issues... [but] Obama was consistently more articulate and seemed to be in better control of himself” (Friedenberg 2008, 76). Obama also continually “went back to his basic thesis that the Bush administration, aided and supported by Senator McCain, had caused our economic woes and was not playing fair with middle-class Americans” (Friedenberg 2008, 70). Obama provided a more in-depth solution to the economic problems during the final debate while also blaming and separating himself from President Bush. Obama also was faster in responding to the economic crisis, developing a recovery plan that, unlike McCain’s, was endorsed by Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Ben S. Bernanke (Chipman and Bliss 2008). Obama also ran ads and publicized worrisome comments made by McCain about the economy. This included McCain saying “the ‘fundamentals of the economy are strong’ and that ‘economics is not something I understand as well as I should’” (Tesler and Sears 2010, 67).

By providing a more in-depth recovery plan that was better articulated in the debates and endorsed by the Chairman of the Federal Reserve, Obama showed Americans that, like them, the economy was his primary concern. McCain believing the economy was strong was not in accord to what most Americans believed and were experiencing in 2008. And by McCain admitting that he does not understand the economy fully, it was no wonder why Americans had more confidence in Obama. Each candidate focused on his areas of expertise allowing them each to

reflect their abilities to the public in their debates and speeches. By knowing the most relevant concerns of Americans and by touching on a broader array of issues, this gave Obama a greater appeal and also helped him convince more Americans that he would perform better than McCain if elected, especially with the given economic environment.

Obama used the economic downturn to appeal to America's working class. With high rates of unemployment, job creation was a repetitive theme throughout his campaign. On the last night of the Democratic National Convention Obama "connected his humble family background, the themes of hard work and middle class struggle, and the incompetent and unjust Republican program very effectively" (Conniff 2008). He compared the self-interested Republican policies that leave Americans on "their own without health insurance, good jobs, and help pulling themselves up by their bootstraps," to his healthcare and job creation initiatives in the public sector (Conniff 2008). These public initiatives Obama planned, along with the continuation and expansion of existing social assistance programs, like welfare, appealed to struggling families. Obama's success in each income level earning under \$50,000 a year attests to this appeal.

Knowing the struggles families were facing to make tuition payments (in addition to mortgage payments), Obama's policies and reform of student loans appealed to many young voters. Obama "outlined a plan for a \$4,000 education tax credit as part of his American Opportunity Tax Credit program. To qualify for the tax credit, a student enrolled at a public college or university must complete 100 hours of public service" (NextStudent 2008). Obama supported a student loan program that is less costly and borrows money straight from the Department of Education, avoiding any private or third party lenders. He also promoted an initiative that rewards community colleges which "that consistently transfer large numbers of students to four-year schools" (NextStudent 2008). And promised to simplify the process for

students applying for financial aid. McCain less frequently discussed the United States' education system, promising to continue Teach for America and provide financial aid for students involved in public service. However, his reform was less substantive than Obama's. Tailoring his policy that would benefit students across the nation, Obama was able appeal to young voters struggling to afford higher education. Obama's campaign also knew the unimpressive voting rates of young citizens, but made a strong effort (which will be discussed in the following section) to mobilize them.

Obama's initiatives to make college more affordable are also consistent with the support he received on Election Day. By making college more affordable with reforms to the student loan and financial aid process and by offering tax credit incentives, Obama's platform would make it easier for Americans to earn a college diploma. This was appealing to Americans struggling to attain a higher level of education. Accordingly, as shown in Table 3.14, with the exception of those with advanced degrees, as education level decreased, support for Obama increased.

### *Advertisements*

There were more political advertisements in 2008 than ever before. Throughout the course of the general election, which officially began on June 5, there were 438,912 pro-Obama ads. Ninety four percent of these ads were paid for by Obama's campaign, whereas only 43% of the 341,183 pro-McCain advertisements were funded by his campaign (Franz and Ridout 2010). The remaining ads were sponsored by third party organizations, including the generous sponsorship from the Republican Party, which paid for 52% of [McCain's](#) fees in television ads. Thus, a majority of the pro-McCain/anti-Obama ads were not in the campaign's control.



Multiple series of ads were produced and sponsored by [the](#) third party organization, Let Freedom Ring. One series of their ads featured candid interviews with prominent conservative African American leaders including a pastor and a niece of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Another one of Let Freedom Ring's advertisements featured a weatherman stating his confidence in McCain in the economy. Let Freedom Ring spent over \$4 million in pro-McCain advertisements (Evans 2008). Our Country Deserves Better, a political action committee (PAC), ran multiple anti-Obama ads in Michigan, a battleground state, which claimed that Obama would impose the Spanish language in America's public school system, that he would raise taxes, and connected Obama to radical leaders like Reverend Jeremiah Wright and former Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick. Citizens Against Government Waste sponsored television advertisements that supported McCain because he reduces taxes and pork barrel spending (Evans 2008). This inconsistency in [ads favoring](#) McCain had a negative effect on the resonance and effectiveness of these ads among viewers (Franz and Ridout 2010).

The McCain campaign's lack of advertisements and lack of control over these ads were a result of the limited budget McCain had after choosing the public financing option, which left him with \$84 million to spend after August. With many more donors, Obama's campaign budget far surpassed that of McCain, raising \$150 million in September alone. This financial advantage helped Obama reach more voters through television advertisements under the control of his campaign.

The anti-Obama ads, aired by McCain's campaign and third party organizations, had a particular effect on turnout. Exacerbating McCain's lack of control and inconsistency was the number of negative ads he televised. From September 28 to October 4, McCain ran, almost unanimously, negative anti-Obama ads (Rabinowitz 2008). The effects of negative campaigning

are always examined in presidential elections. Researchers “identified a link between negative candidate advertisements and lower voter turnouts in both local and national elections, and more importantly, found that negative candidate advertising was responsible for a decrease in political efficacy, interest and partisanship” (Boesch and Wakao 2009, 4). Third party organizations are guilty for producing mostly negative ads that are character-based and neglect policy criticism, their ads often lack a clear identity of the sponsorship, and they have unlimited funds which attributes to the influx of character attack ads (Boesch and Wakao 2009). Credibility of the source of the advertisement is also important for viewers in evaluating advertisements. In 2008, character attack ads by third party organizations decreased turnout, whereas, the same type of attack advertisements from a candidate’s campaign had no effect (Boesch and Wakao 2009). It is possible that the anti-Obama ads sponsored by third party organizations deterred likely McCain voters (like whites, who had a decrease in turnout in 2008) away from voting, hurting McCain in the on Election Day.

Franz and Ridout (2010) also tested the effects of political ads by calculating the weight advertisements had on citizens in the 2008 presidential election. The pair estimated changes in the election outcome if “Obama had been able to purchase only 75% of the total ads he actually bought in October” (Franz and Ridout 2010, 318). If this were the case, Franz and Ridout (2010) predicted that 300,000 votes would have been affected, resulting in losses in North Carolina and Florida. Although this wouldn’t have cost Obama the election, this study indicates the combined effects of political advertisements *and* a financial advantage.

Throughout the course of campaigning, Obama spent more than \$310 million in national advertisements, compared to the \$134 million spent by McCain's campaign.<sup>19</sup> McCain spent more than \$10 million worth of ads in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida. However, in these four states Obama still outspent McCain in advertising in each. Obama funded more than \$10 million worth of ads in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Colorado, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Indiana, New Hampshire, Virginia, and North Carolina. And he won in 11 of these 12 states, losing just in Missouri (CNN.com 2008).

With the results of effects of advertisements found by Franz and Ridout (2010) it is evident that advertisements influenced voters and that the more advertisements Obama ran, the more support he gained. If Obama had funded fewer ads he, as Franz and Ridout (2010) prove, he would have seen less support on Election Day. Therefore, Obama's influx of spending on advertisements in Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, Colorado, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Indiana, New Hampshire, Virginia, and North Carolina attributes to his success in 11 of 12 of these states. In addition to running more advertisements, Obama's ads were more effective because they were more consistent and less negative than McCain's (Boesch and Wakao 2009). Therefore, it is safe to say that Obama's abundance of spending on advertisements, which were more consistent and less negative than McCain's ads, aided in his success (Boesch and Wakao 2009; Franz and Ridout 2010).

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<sup>19</sup> This campaigning period, as defined by CNN.com is from January 1, 2007 to November 4, 2008. This explains why McCain spent more than the \$84 he was allotted in the fall of 2008, after he chose the public financing option

### *Campaign Contact*

With 700 field offices, 1,400 paid staffers, and 6 million volunteers, Barack Obama's campaign was by far the largest America has ever seen. Obama's field offices almost doubled those of McCain in quantity. These offices, strategically placed mostly in battleground states, were filled with paid staffers and volunteers. "The presence of an Obama field office was associated with a .08 percentage point increase in the Democratic vote share in the county. Although this is not an enormous effect, it is worth noting that the presidential contests in North Carolina and Missouri were settled by margins smaller than this, and Indiana's margin was only slightly greater" (Masket 2009, 1032). In counties that hosted both McCain and Obama offices, there was no aggregate Democratic shift. However, in counties with just McCain offices, it seemed as though his presence had an adverse effect, increasing the Democratic share of the vote, by an extremely small margin however (Masket 2009).

The presence of a campaign field office undoubtedly had an effect on voters. If there were no Obama offices in Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina evidence shows that Obama still would have won in these states. Nevertheless, if these voters that were affected by the Obama campaign were instead contacted and persuaded by the McCain campaign, McCain would have won in Indiana and North Carolina. In some states, an Obama field office led to a three-percentage point Democratic advantage. Overall, however, Obama's abundance of field offices increased his support by about one percentage point (Masket 2009).

The staffers and volunteers that filled these field offices assisted in canvassing, making phone calls, handing out campaign materials, and registering voters. Thousands of the volunteers, mostly young adults and college students, attended intense training sessions. The sessions helped teach and equip these volunteers with the tools needed to effectively promote

and inform voters about candidate Obama. In his army of 6 million volunteers, 15,000 were 'super-volunteers' that "had left their jobs or dropped out of school to help" (Lizza 2008) with campaigning efforts.

The wealth of manpower supporting Obama's campaign aided in contacting millions of voters. This also had an effect on voter turnout, which will be discussed later in this section. Reaching 26% of voters, Obama bested McCain in contacting Americans by eight percentage-points. Exit poll data on campaign contact is available from Nevada, Colorado, Indiana, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Florida, North Carolina, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, and West Virginia, all highly competitive states. In each, with the exception of West Virginia, Obama's campaign contacted more voters (Silver 2008). It should be no surprise that Obama won in each of these states where his campaign reached more voters, losing only in West Virginia where McCain's campaign contacted more voters.

Obama's margin of victory in Nevada was among the highest in respect to these 12 battleground states, with 12 percentage points. Nevada also experienced the largest discrepancy in campaign contact, where Obama's team had reached half of voters, compared to the 29% that was contacted by the McCain campaign (Silver 2008). With this evidence, one would assume that the strong effort to contact voters made by the Obama campaign was responsible for his large margin of success. Ironically, however, in Wisconsin, where Obama had his lowest advantage in contact rate, of just 3%, he won on Election Day by the largest margin of 13 percentage points (CNN.com 2008; Silver 2008). Aside from Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana, however, there seems to be a direct (and somewhat proportional relationship) with the margin of victory Obama had in these dozen states compared to his advantage in campaign contact. In fact,

“roughly speaking, each marginal 10-point advantage in contact rate translated into a marginal 3-point gain in the popular vote in that state” (Silver 2008).

Obama’s campaign contact outnumbered McCain’s but was also more strategic and effective than past campaigns. In 2004, the Democrats targeted their contact, in this case phone calls and door knocking, to Democratic districts. Whereas in 2008, as exemplified in Ohio, Democrats “were far more efficient in targeting individual voters.... they did a better job targeting two groups: (1) those with a high probability of voting Democratic but a weaker history of turning out to vote and (2) more persuadable ‘swing’ voters with a very strong history of past voting” (Blumenthal 2009).

“This high level of contact almost certainly reflects an effort by the Obama campaign to help encourage a record-high turnout” especially among voters, like African Americans and citizens under 30, that have a high probability of voting Democratic and that are more persuadable (Jones, Newport, and Saad 2008). African Americans, who historically have a low voting rate and tend to favor Democratic politics, received a lot of attention and contact from the Obama campaign. “Blacks report having been contacted in disproportionately higher numbers by the Obama campaign... [and were] almost four times as likely to report having been contacted by the Obama campaign as by the McCain campaign” (Jones, Newport, and Saad 2010). The increase in interest in the campaign among African Americans, which was probably propelled by the probability of the United States electing its first black president, made [blacks](#) as likely as whites to vote in 2008.

Knowing the likelihood of African Americans to vote for Obama, because he is a Democrat, joined with higher rates of campaign contact showed the effort of Obama’s campaign to increase turnout among African Americans. It proved to be successful. As [reported in Chapter](#)

3, the voting rate of African Americans increased from 2004 by 4.7 percentage points to 60% (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Furthermore, Obama received an overwhelming 95% of votes from African Americans (Roper Center 2008). Obama applied a similar strategy to Hispanics, knowing their Democratic tendencies. The Democratic Party and Barack Obama's campaign spent \$20 million in organizing and mobilizing Hispanic voters.<sup>20</sup> The turnout of Hispanics increased by 2.7 percentage points since 2004 and 67% of Hispanics voted for Obama (refer to Chapter 3; Roper Center 2008; U.S. Census Bureau 2008).

Obama's campaign applied similar tactics they employed for African Americans to younger voters as well. There was strong effort to mobilize young voters in 2008. Nearly one-third of young voters under 30 considered themselves liberal, which would make them more likely to vote for Obama (Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson 2008). Obama's financial aid and student loan reform was also more appealing to college students. Many of these college students believed so much in Obama's policies they left school to help the campaign, started 800 Students for Obama chapters on campuses across the country, or even just talked to their peers about Obama's initiatives. The campaign assembled a "sophisticated recruitment and mobilization effort to target young voters on and off college campuses, including hiring activists from recent campus protest movements, student government leaders and political neophytes" (Dreier 2008). This is an example of the role interpersonal relationship and opinion leaders play in decision-making, as mentioned in Chapter 1.

With so many young staffers and volunteers it was easy for Obama's campaign efforts to target other young voters. Knowing that younger Americans are technologically savvy, Obama

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<sup>20</sup>Daniel Nasaw, "US Elections: Democrats Dedicate \$20m to Mobilising Hispanic Vote," *Guardian News*, 29 July 2008.  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/29/barackobama.uselections20081>

used the Internet and websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to inform and appeal to the younger generation of voters. He also sent out text messages on Election Day reminding them to vote. “A quarter of voters (25%) 18-29 say someone contacted them in person or by phone on behalf of the Obama campaign about coming out to vote. By contrast, just 13% were contacted by the McCain campaign” (Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson 2008). There was an even larger discrepancy in campaign contact among younger voters in battleground states.

The turnout rate of voters under 30 went up 8.3 percentage points since 2004 and it looked “that mobilization efforts aimed at young people may have paid off” (Keeter, Horowitz, and Tyson 2008). This increase in voting rates among 18- 29 year olds helped Obama, being that he received 66% of their votes. As Table 3.9 shows, Obama gained 12.5 percentage points more votes among young people than Kerry had in 2004. Younger voters have often been ignored in campaigning because historically they have low voting rates. However, the 2008 presidential election excited and energized America’s youth like never before. Twenty eight percent of Americans under 30 in battleground states attended a campaign event and the rate of participation in 2008 among younger voters continued their upward trend. And Obama benefited by targeting and mobilizing younger voters because they are more easily persuaded and traditionally tend to favor liberal policies.

This effort within historically Democratic demographics proved that Obama’s campaign tactics to increase voter registration and turnout among likely voters was a success. Recall that yoter turnout among whites and those that earn an income of over \$75,000 a year decreased (U.S. Census Bureau 2008). Both of these demographics typically favor Republican policies. The lower voting rates among these demographics along with their tendencies to favor Republican candidates also aided Obama.



Obama's staff and volunteers were largely responsible for the strategic increase in turnout among African Americans, Hispanics, and younger voters because they were able to target and contact more voters. Obama spent \$58.8 million in salaries and benefits to his 1,400 paid employees, 500 of which were full-time. McCain spent less than half of that, allotting \$24 million in compensation to his staffers. This was a result from the \$279 million advantage Obama had over McCain in fundraising, once again noting the benefits of having a financial advantage (Center for Responsive Politics 2009).<sup>21</sup>

Contact from one of the four candidates was also important in campaigning in 2008. McCain and Palin traveled more than Obama and Biden, making 150 visits in total. Ohio received the most attention with a total of 50 visits from all four candidates (CNN.com 2008). Because there was less overlap in 2008 than in 2004 in the counties visited by each of the four candidates, the number of Americans that candidates came in contact with was greater in 2008 than in 2004. It should be no surprise that candidates spend a disproportional amount of time, money, and energy on battleground states like Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. "In fact, visits to these four states accounted for nearly half of all the campaign appearances made by the candidates for President and Vice President of the United States combined" (Chen and Reeves 2009, 1).

Alabama, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, Vermont, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming had no visits by any of the four candidates. To determine if candidate visits had an effect on vote choice, I compared the discrepancy among candidate visits with the difference of the popular vote among every state. Among all 50 states there is no relationship,

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<sup>21</sup> Brian C. Mooney, "Obama's Paid Staff Dwarfing McCain's," *The Boston Globe*, 20 July 2008. [http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/07/20/obamas\\_paid\\_staff\\_dwarfing\\_mccains/](http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/07/20/obamas_paid_staff_dwarfing_mccains/)

trend, or pattern between these two differences. For example, as seen in Table 4.1, the two tickets (McCain-Palin and Obama-Biden) visited the same amount in Georgia and Wyoming. McCain won in both these states but in Georgia by five percentage points and in Wyoming by 32 points (CNN.com 2008)

In some states, there was a pattern with candidate visits and increase in margin of victory, however it seems as though the success in these states (whether from McCain or Obama) was attributed to other factors. In [Illinois](#) for instance, Obama and Biden visited 11 times more than McCain and Palin, and Obama's margin of victory in Illinois was quite high, with 25 percentage points. The same correlation was seen in Arizona, Delaware, and Alaska but these four states, being the home states of the candidates, made it easier for them to visit and campaign. And voters probably were more likely to favor their native politician (CNN.com 2008).

Among the 12 battleground states,<sup>22</sup> Nevada, West Virginia, and Wisconsin, which had the same number of candidate visits, also had the largest margin of victory. If candidate visits had an effect on voters, especially in battleground states, I expected to find smaller margins of victory where candidates visited in the same frequency. Ironically, my findings indicate the opposite of what I had expected. This is not to mean that candidate appearances in states have no effect on voters. Instead, it alludes to a discrepancy in attention that battleground states receive as opposed to designated 'blue' or 'red' states.

In 2008 it was the strategies of appearances of the McCain-Palin and Obama-Biden tickets which scholars believe had the most impact on voters. "The McCain-Palin campaign pursued a base strategy and visited their core partisans... Instead, the Democrats pursued a

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<sup>22</sup> Nevada, Colorado, Indiana, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Iowa, Florida, North Carolina, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, and West Virginia.

peripheral strategy and targeted voters in counties that had experienced significant population growth and therefore an influx of new voters” (Chen and Reeves 2009, 17).

The difference in strategies between the two campaigns in visiting states made measuring the effects of these visits difficult. As with contact, Obama’s campaign sought to reach communities with new voters and with citizens that would be especially likely to favor Democratic policies, like African Americans and Latinos. And while no correlation was seen in candidate visits, Obama’s strategy of targeting these new voters did benefit him in increasing turnout among likely Democratic voters that were historically unlikely to vote on Election Day.

### Conclusions

The changes in public opinion polls show that Obama garnered more support by Election Day than he started with. This, along with the evidenced change and Democratic shift, shows the influence that external factors, like the political climate and campaigns, have on vote choice. In 2008 the economy and evaluations of President Bush influenced voters. It was difficult to isolate the effects of the context of the election and the effects of Obama’s campaign. Although some research, as mentioned in this chapter, attempts to isolate the effects of the economy (foreclosures and unemployment) and the effects of Obama’s campaign (field offices, campaign contact, and advertisements) it was impossible to separate the two completely because the Obama campaign used the economic and political environment to its advantage, mentioning it repetitively throughout the campaigning season, and possibly magnifying the effects of the political and economic climate.

Obama used the context of the election to his advantage by highlighting the similarities McCain had to Bush (voting record and Republicanism), knowing that most Americans

disapproved of the president. Knowing that voters were looking for change, especially after the failed leadership of President Bush, the overarching thesis of Obama's campaign was the change he would bring. With the economy as the most important issue, being the first to announce his detailed recovery plan benefited Obama. Not only was Obama able to better articulate his plan to Americans in the presidential debates, he also had an endorsement from the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. Obama also highlighted his eagerness to solve the economic crisis with McCain's interest by repeating on the campaign trail and in advertisements that McCain had admitted to not fully understanding the economy and that he believes the economy was strong as it was.

Research, as presented in this chapter, does suggest that the environment of the election would have benefited any Democratic candidate. But the research does not conclude that any Democratic candidate would have won in 2008. Even with the context of the election benefiting Democrats, the landslide victory that forecasters predicted for Obama never occurred. The reasons as to why the election was not the landslide predicted will be discussed in the concluding chapter of this thesis. This chapter, however, provides the evidence and reasons behind the change and Democratic shift in 2008. It is certain that Obama's effective campaign efforts, which incorporated context, guided him to success. However, with the extensive research and evidence provided it is evident that Obama could not have won the election based on the political and economic environment alone.

Table 4.1  
Comparison of Candidate Visits and Margin of Victory in States

State	Margin of Candidate Visits by Democrat	Obama's Margin of Victory
Pennsylvania	-21	+11
Minnesota	-8	+10
New York	-7	+27
Ohio	-6	+5
Arizona	-5	-9
Colorado	-5	+9
Iowa	-5	+9
New Mexico	-3	+15
California	-2	+24
Maine	-2	+18
Mississippi	-2	-13
Nebraska	-2	-15
Alaska	-1	-22
Arkansas	-1	-20
Louisiana	-1	-19
Missouri	-1	-1
New Jersey	-1	+15
South Dakota	-1	-8
Tennessee	-1	-15
Alabama	0	-22
Connecticut	0	+23
Georgia	0	-5
Idaho	0	-25
Kansas	0	-15
Kentucky	0	-17
Maryland	0	+30
Nevada	0	+12
New Hampshire	0	+9
Oklahoma	0	-32
Oregon	0	+16
South Carolina	0	-9
Texas	0	-11
Utah	0	-29
Vermont	0	+37
West Virginia	0	-13
Wisconsin	0	+13
Wyoming	0	-32
Florida	+1	+3
Hawaii	+1	+45
Massachusetts	+1	+26
Michigan	+1	+16
North Dakota	+1	-8
Rhode Island	+1	+28
Washington	+1	+17
Montana	+3	-3
Indiana	+3	+1
North Carolina	+4	+1
Delaware	+6	+25
District of Columbia		+86

	+9	
Virginia	+9	+6
Illinois	+11	+25

Source: CNN.com *Election Center 2008*.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis is to test the effects of Barack Obama's campaign for president in 2008. First, I attempt to disprove the limited effects theory that posits voters are unaffected by campaigns because of their political predispositions by highlighting the changes in vote choice in 2008. In doing so, I compared historical voting rates and tendencies of social groups with those of 2008. After presenting all the factors that influence voters, I then analyzed the effects of Obama's campaign along with the effects of the political and economic climate. The main goal of this thesis then became to define the most important factor that affects vote choice.

Chapter 2 provides a description of the 2008 presidential election. The candidates, John McCain and Barack Obama, each had their unique qualities. McCain, a veteran, in the military and in Washington, is an expert in foreign policy. Obama's youth and lack of experience brought energy and a fresh face into American politics and the election. In the presidential debates Obama's eloquence and composure shone through. Although nothing monumental occurred, he was deemed the winner of all three. Obama's campaign, along with the economy and poor evaluations of President Bush, which created a favorable context for Democrats, all contributed to his success. Both campaigns were well run, however, Obama's trumped McCain's in size and money.

In 2008, there was a Democratic shift. This shift was evident in almost every demographic examined in Chapter 3. In seeking to establish the reasons behind this Democratic shift, Chapter 4 investigates the effects of the economy and evaluations of President Bush along with the effects of Obama's campaigning. The context of the election proved to be more favorable for the Democrats, however Obama's campaigning effectively used the political and economic environment to his advantage. Election Day proved that each candidate appealed to his respective base but Obama was able to capture more votes from nonpartisans, which secured him the White House.

#### *Conclusion: Disproving the Limited Effects Theory*

This thesis demonstrates that voters are not as predictable as scholars had originally thought. It began with a review of the existing literature. Chapter 1 presented the two schools of thought about the effects of campaigning. The limited effects theory, supported by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Guadet, proposes that individuals hold on to their predispositions tightly

enough that their votes, by and large, are not affected by campaigns. The other school of thought (Abramowitz, Holbrook, and Key) discredits this theory, suggesting that voters are more influenceable than Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Gaudet had assumed. I had predicted that with an analysis of the campaigns, context, candidates, and results from the election, I would find that Obama's campaign would support the latter theory, that voters are influenced by campaigns.

Truth be told, this prediction was impossible to prove. Because this thesis lacked the capital, manpower, and time to conduct research that is equivalent to Lazarsfeld, Berelson, McPhee, and Gaudet's, my evidence is not directly comparable. These limitations (which also include the ability to travel back in time) prevented me from engaging with voters throughout the course of the 2008 campaign season to understand what affected their vote choice and if vote choice had changed. Therefore, unlike these prior scholars, I was unable to identify converters, individuals that had changed their original vote intention, during the 2008 campaign season. I was, however, able to analyze the existing research and data about the 2004 and 2008 election and campaigns.

As Chapter 3 establishes, there was a Democratic shift seen across the United States, in almost every demographic studied when compared to the baseline of 2004. Comparing the election results from 2004 to 2008 of social groups provides a sufficient understanding of the Democratic shift in 2008. Still, it assumes that voters in 2004 voted similarly to how they have in previous elections. This completely neglects the possibility that individuals in 2004 could have voted in a manner that opposes one's previous predispositions and voting behavior. Therefore, I could not identify converters from 2004 and 2008 (which still wouldn't have been consistent with the existing literature). But, with the data available, I was able to demonstrate the significant



Democratic shift in 2008. This doesn't necessarily indicate conversion, but it does indicate change.

The ANES data proved some voters are willing to vote outside their party. The individuals that voted for Bush in 2004 and Obama in 2008 demonstrate that people are flexible in their party alignment. And the fluctuation in public opinion polls throughout the earlier part of the campaign indicates that voters do change their vote intention throughout an election season. This evidence brings the limited effects theory into question. It shows that individuals are not as predictable as scholars had previously assumed and that external factors can be responsible for affecting vote choice.

I had originally intended to disprove the limited effects theory and prove that campaigns matter most in affecting votes. Given the limitations of this thesis and the data available it was not as simple as I had anticipated. However, with the available information I was still able to arrive at conclusions that support the idea that voters are influencable.

#### *Conclusion: Campaign Effects Cannot Be Isolated*

In taking a step beyond just disproving the limited effects theory, I wanted to define what exactly propelled vote choice in 2008. What had caused this Democratic shift, since the evidence proved it was not merely predispositions? With the dismal economy and poor evaluations of President Bush, was it the context of the election? Or was it Obama's effective campaigning strategies? Answering these questions proved to be harder than I had anticipated. Isolating the context of the election with the campaign efforts was virtually impossible, especially since the context of the election proposed many relevant issues that the campaigns discussed.

Nevertheless, some of the research examined pinpoints the effects of the economic and political climate. The exact effects of unemployment were unclear, however more research indicates that higher rates of joblessness benefited Obama (Cho and Gimpel 2009; Masket 2009). It was determined that with the increase of one standard deviation away from the average of foreclosures, the Democratic share of the vote increased by 1.26-9.2% (Cho and Gimpel 2009). However, there were significantly high rates of foreclosures in regions that are strongly Republican. The economic hardships of these individuals didn't propel them enough to depart from their traditional voting tendencies and vote for Obama, a Democrat. Therefore, this research couldn't provide concrete support about the effects of the economy on individuals and their vote choice.

The influx in support for Obama seen after mid-September, when the financial crisis triggered government intervention, showed the confidence Americans had in him over McCain in finding a solution. As one's perception of the economy decreased the more likely one was to vote for Obama, although McCain and Obama had somewhat similar recovery plans. This increase in support was a result from the actions of Obama's campaign. By articulating a more detailed economic plan to Americans in the presidential debates, by having the endorsement of Bernanke, Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and by publicizing McCain's lack of economic understanding and his positive evaluation of the economy (which most Americans disagreed with) Obama tackled this issue that was most concerning to America. It was these efforts that led Americans to have more confidence in Obama. Half of voters in 2008 were very worried about the economy, of those 60% voted for Obama (ABC News 2008). This shows that Obama's campaign efforts were successful in garnering more votes from Americans that were the most

concerned about the economy by proving he was the most capable and viable candidate in finding a solution.

The effects of poor approval ratings proved to be a bit more concrete. With an election-forecasting model based on presidential approval, it was determined that Bush's widespread disapproval left McCain with a disadvantage of 3.8 percentage points (Abramowitz 2008). Among those that disapprove of President Bush, Obama received 73.8% of their vote (ANES 2008). Through the campaign strategies of highlighting Bush and McCain's similar voting records and their shared Republican background, Obama was able to link McCain to the highly disapproved Bush administration. Knowing that most Americans were making their vote decision in searching for change, Obama contrasted himself with Bush, arguing that he would be the change they wanted. Obama's high level of support among Bush disapprovers demonstrated the effectiveness of his campaign in linking Bush with McCain and separating Obama from Bush.

Therefore, Obama's campaigning efforts were focused around the economic and political climate, which made it impossible to isolate the effects of the context with the effects of the campaign. Research, as presented in the previous chapter, does attempt to isolate the effects of the context of the election. The evidence quantifies the effects of unemployment, foreclosure, and approval ratings of President Bush on vote choice. If these three short-term factors did not play a role in the election, their aggregate effect would have changed the outcome of the election, looking at the popular vote. This is because Obama did not experience the landslide victory that forecasters had predicted given the advantageous economic and political climate along with his massive campaign.

*Conclusion: Race Prevented a Landslide Victory for Obama*

All the information and research examined for this thesis alludes to an array of factors that aided Obama in his success: the economy, the poor evaluations of President Bush, the financial advantage, and the benefit of being a Democrat. In addition to this favorable environment was the largest presidential campaign in American history. However, the outcome of the election doesn't seem to add up. With all the advantages Obama had, why was his margin of victory so small?

It could have been that McCain's campaign overcame the adversity of the unfavorable environment for Republicans in 2008. This would suggest that McCain's campaign was *more* effective than Obama's because the context was working against McCain, yet he lost the popular vote (which broke down to Obama's 52.9% and McCain's 45.6%) by just 7.3 percentage points (Cho and Gimpel 2009). However, McCain's campaign was almost incomparable to Obama's, especially in terms of financial support and manpower.

Given the context of the election, forecasters predicted the economic and political climate would be favorable for any Democratic candidate. These predictions were made well before the financial meltdown in mid-September. The meltdown would have assumedly added support for Obama in these predictions. However, given his large campaign, the larger Democratic base, and his financial advantage, *along with* the favorable economic and political climate, Obama's margin of victory did not equate to all these factors he had working in his favor. In fact, Obama's margin of victory in the popular vote did not exceed the measured effects of just Bush's low approval ratings, foreclosures, and unemployment.

Scholars have attributed this 'missing' support on Election Day to racism. Experts believe that Obama did not win by the large margin they were expecting because racism affected

votes. Although “both John McCain and Barack Obama were extremely reluctant to make race an issue,” race was an intrinsic issue in the election, with Obama being the first viable African American president (Tesler and Sears 2010, 54). Obama avoided explicitly addressing his race throughout the campaign, the undertones of many of his speeches marked the obstacles he overcame as well as the feat his victory would bring. Knowing that race would be an issue in the election, Obama’s strategists effectively targeted individuals that are not discriminatory. In doing so, they identified racially liberal segments of the population that believe in and support racial equality. Obama’s campaign also identified individuals with lower racial resentment levels that believe blacks still face discrimination, do not have a poor work ethic, are not too demanding, and have not yet achieved what they deserve (Tesler and Sears 2010). “Since most Americans score on the conservative side of the resentment spectrum... Obama’s powerful performance among racial liberals offset much of this disadvantage” (Tesler and Sears 2010, 62).

Obama could not have run on his character and experience alone, knowing the racial sentiment in the U.S. Therefore, he *needed* to use the short-term factors that affect vote choice (like evaluations of the economy and the president) to propel voters away from their racist tendencies (Tesler and Sears 2010). If Obama were a white man running as a Democrat, he probably would have won by a landslide. If the context of the election was not as favorable for Democrats as it was, it is likely that he would have lost the election because racism wouldn’t have overcome the context.

#### *Implication of the 2008 Presidential Election: Money Matters*

By refusing the public finance option, Obama was able to raise and spend more money. With such a large budget, Obama’s options were seemingly limitless. Obama and Biden were

constantly on the campaign trail, making costly visits in many of the battleground states. His financial advantage allowed him to have not only more advertisements, but also more control over these ads. Because television advertisements are so expensive, the multitude of ads is a direct result from available funding. The number of ads affected voters, as well as the consistency of these ads (Franz and Ridout 2010). Obama's campaign had the capital to open almost double as many field offices McCain's campaign had. The presence of field offices proved to slightly benefit the candidate where his office was located (Masket 2009). And thus, with many more field offices, Obama was able to influence more communities to his benefit.

Having a paid staff of 1,400 along with over six million volunteers, the manpower that supported Obama's campaign was unprecedented and his largest asset. This allowed him to contact many more voters than McCain. And as one would expect, in 2008 campaign contact had a direct relationship with support on Election Day (Silver 2008). Obama's army of staffers and volunteers helped him contact and inform more Americans, and most importantly, encouraged them to vote. It was the impressive turnout on Election Day from targeted specific social groups that proved the effectiveness of Obama's campaign contact.

The effects of having a financial advantage were so prominent in 2008 because Obama had a significantly larger budget than McCain. Ironically, it was McCain's initiatives, which promoted publicly funded campaigns that put him at a massive disadvantage. The ways in which campaigns attempt to affect voters is extremely costly. And because, as this thesis has proved, citizens are influencable, campaigns will continue to spend money attempting to influence Americans, garner more votes, and affect the outcome of elections.

Knowing the importance money has in campaigns, some candidates act unethically, giving donors preferential treatment over other citizens, in desperation to obtain funding. Even

after being elected, politicians continue their fundraising efforts for their next campaign, frequently neglecting their duties as an elected official. The burdening expense of running a campaign also deters many capable and passionate individuals from running for office. As evidenced in the 2008 presidential election, the influence of money in campaigns (and politics) is growing. If this influence continues to grow, money will become a threat to our democracy.

*Main Conclusion: Context and Campaigning Matters*

Because it was impossible to isolate the campaign effects from the effects of the election's context, my results are not as decisive as I would have liked. However, it is indubitable that Obama's campaign used the political and economic environment to its benefit. Thus, I am able to conclude that campaigns *and* context matter. Without the political and economic climate, it is extremely possible that Obama would have lost the election. If the economy was thriving and approval of President Bush was high, based on retrospective and rational choice voting theories, Republicans would have had a more favorable environment.

The Democratic shift indicated that Americans are less attached to their political tendencies and more flexible than what the limited effect theory gives credence to. The state of the economy and evaluations of President Bush were so poor in 2008 that Americans were propelled to leave many of their preexisting predispositions (including racist tendencies) and previous voting behaviors to vote for Obama. The Obama campaign would not have been as effective if it didn't already have the economic and political climate already working in its favor. Therefore, as described in Chapters 1 and 4, evaluations of the economy and president along with other short-term factors, as demonstrated in 2008, have the largest influence on vote choice. However, as previously stated, candidates cannot win based on the context of the election alone.

By understanding the relevant issues and strategically conveying solutions, campaigns, like Obama's, can use the context of the election to their advantage.

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